

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET

stories

FRANK
MAGUIRE
ARTIST

A.S.C.

Nov.
25



Only one, a Corvett, ever
escaped from terror and
death—

THE PIT
OF PYMPHONS
by STANLEY MULLEN

SWORDSMAN of
LOST TERRA

Moved off an odd world
slipped back in time...

by POUL ANDERSON



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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 3 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER, 1951

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Proud Kery of Broina felt like a ghost himself; shade of a madman flitting hopelessly to the citadel of Earth's disinherited to recapture the fierce, resonant Pipes of Killorn—weapon of the gods—before they blared out the dirge of the world.

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T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, General Manager

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Under the pressure of more serious duties, Mr. Robot R. is taking one gigantic step to the side to make room for an aide, Mr. Robot O. The latter is still squeaky in the joints from the dust of too many westerns . . . but already here comes Robot R. with the oil can. And the pic winners are, Sept. issue, (1) M. W. Corby, (2) A. A. Craig, (3) Don Lanoue.

NO OGRE, WE

459 Sterling St. N.E.
Atlanta, Ga.

Dear Editor:

I wonder why it is that you allow, or worse, select, the Klannish, ignorant, prejudiced and biased letters of a vociferously vocal minority of your readers to contaminate the pages of La Vizi? Do you do it on the basis that it will arouse the indignation of many others, and thus insure their continued purchases of PLANET? Do you subscribe to their doctrines of racial hatred, intolerance and bigotry? Or do you believe that they are entitled to their say merely on the strength of their expenditure of 25¢ for PLANET? There must be reason for the continued appearance of Sigler and his followers, such as Lanoue, in the September issue—"the boy with the same political and racial ideas I have," indeed.

Regrettably, I reside in a section of this country where the KKK has perpetrated some of its most infamous acts of cowardice; where labor agitators who openly claim loyalty to the hammer and sickle are at this moment desperately seeking to impede defense work at the new atomic installations; where lynchings still occur despite Federal intervention; in short, where you may witness the most despicable elements of humanity putting into effect the beliefs that Sigler, et al, hold. The only ray of sunshine thru this welter of mob cowardice is the continued decrease in the size of such organizations.

Perhaps, in the yellow anonymity of the mob, Sigler will find it possible to put into action his repressed-hatred of all men who fail to smoke his brand of cigarettes, or part their hair on the same side that he does. I have no knowledge of Sigler's age, but if he should be eligible for the draft, and should find himself in a branch of the service which has abolished segregation, then God have mercy on him, for his small, shriveled soul would surely perish.

Disgustedly,

HENRY W. BURWELL, JR.

Our purpose is to air as many views as space permits. . . . Ed.



TYROI

Box 666
Camrose, Alberta

Dear Editor:

Seeing that I didn't get my other letter published I guess I'll have to try, try again. It's never say die with me, as you'll probably find out. I've just finished reading the VIZIGRAPH in the May issue. I always start with this section first. Secretly enjoyed the letters commenting on the shortcomings of one, Dennis Strong.

Since I'm not qualified to comment on anything—according to Mr. Strong—I'll hold my peace. Believe-it-or-not, I'm not going to try to be witty; this letter will contain absolutely no parenthesized words and serious comment will be given on stories. For a slightly demented high school student that's pretty good, eh wot?

There won't be any uninteresting comments on stories in this letter but I would like to ask some questions. The first is: What in Heaven is a "BEM"? Perhaps I'm just "iggerunt" but so much reference has been made to this subject—person—thing—that my curiosity is aroused. I think it's a man of some sort, but what sort? Well, I'll leave that in your capable hands.

Secondly: Who is this Dave Dryfoos, author of SIGN OF LIFE, in the May issue? His story, though short, was good. Could it be another name for someone like Henry Kuttner, for instance? Or Jack Vance, or—but I could go on indefinitely. If he happens to be newcomer, more power to him, I say.

Yours sincerely,

(MISS) MAVIS HARTMAN

Bug-eyed-monster. And I do not think you'll find him, her or it in Heaven. . . . Ed.

ILLO ILL?

Box 215
Summerland, Calif.

Dear Ed:

Once upon a time there was a timid but brilliant science-fiction author who sent you some of his geniusiacal (there ain't no such word so don't drive the copy boys nuts trying to find it) work with the fervent prayer that you would see his greatness and share it by discovering it. But you sneered. Egad man, what a chance you let slip through your pudgy fingers! He is a second Bradbury and consequently you shall suffer the monstrous humility of having him turn to a competitor.

Gad man, the shame of it all! And sir, do you realize that that very same genius named Orvil Stien (modern spelling) was that self-same Bill Tuning whose gnarled fingers now clutch his battered typewriter? (Melodramatic groan here.) Yes, I have gone to other pastures. Will they, too, fail to see the luster of my inspired work? Or will they rise to undreamed-of heights through their discovery of me?

What will happen to the poor starving (weight, 222½) writer? Tune in next month at this same time to "You Too Can Write STF" and see what happens to Orvil Stie . . . gluggggggggg.

But enough of this sad tale, I shall venture my rating on the stories of the July issue.

(1) TEMPLE OF HAN. In this story Jack Vance has achieved somewhat of the fascinating, haunting quality of Brackett. I can still see the ghastly torture in the crab-warren.

(2) THE TIMELESS ONES. This too had the gripping unreality of No. 1. But the illo did fifty

percent of the work. Anyway, the surprise ending really jarred my guts.

(3) BLACKOUT IN CYGNI. Gad, what a story! It was almost as exciting as Ed Hamilton's STAR KINGS. Although it really was a space opera, it was what is known rather confusedly as a space opera not a space opera. As for instance, Wally West's THE DARK TOWER, and Hamilton's STAR KINGS. This type of stuff is my favorite kind of STF. But let's get on with it.

(4) THE VIRGIN OF VALKARION. First of all, let me say something about the illo; AAAAAAA-AAKKK! The same goes for the cover in regards to accuracy. For the interior illo, as an art student, I'd say it stunk, and as an average stiction fan I'd say it was done by an ignorant bum who never saw a pen in his worthless life.

The main point is: *Alfirc never owned a short-sword in his life!* And this character who didn't have the nerve to sign his name so it could be read, pictured (and I use the term loosely) him with one of these damn little frogstickers in his hand. Now let me tear loose at the cover.

(A) Alfirc isn't carrying a broadsword. (B) That's the first time I ever saw a sword of any kind with a round hilt. (C) The moons look like a couple of golf balls. They're much too big to be moons anyway. (D) I don't remember any such scene from the novel.

(5) VENUS MISSION.

(6) is a toss-up between SIGN OF LIFE and MERCY FLIGHT.

MONSTER isn't even worth mentioning. Whatta ches'nut.

My Vizivotes go to Dick Ryan, first, for neatly cutting Strong's throat. Second, Edward Cox. Third, Jimmie Burgess.

About this Strong character (As Cox said, no pun intended) I do believe that when I was a mere infant fan I read Mr. Strong's gallant but rankly snobbish communique in the March issue. I didn't think much of it at the time because I wasn't well enough acquainted with the field for it to mean anything to me. But I do know that when I read it, it sent my blood pressure up sixteen notches. I have hence regretted trading off my first STF mags, but they all went to one guy so I'll be able to get most of them back.

Gotta go now so I'll say, I remain,
Stifantastically yours,

BILL TUNING

STILL WITH US

RA 14345682
Co. N, S.T.R.
Fort Monmouth, N. J.

Dear Editor:

I'm not taking an active part in fandom since I enlisted in the Army last year, but I'm forced to congratulate you on the recent improvement in dear old P.S. It's worth the increase in price. You now have some of the foremost authors in the STF field. Keep up the good work.

Comments on the July '51 issue seem to be in order, so here goes: It is good to see Rocklynne back again even though SLAVE SHIP TO ANDRIGO didn't seem to be up to his usual standard. Could this yarn possibly be a reprint? [Nope—Ed.]

Poul Anderson wasn't quite up to standard either, but I enjoyed his story anyway. The other yarns were readable; no classics, but no stinkers either.

In regard to Dennis Strong: Get off your high
(Continued on page 108)





The Dark Londers
rioted under inhuman
fear; in the blind panic
which the pipes sang to them.

by POUL ANDERSON

Swordsman of Lost Terra

Proud Kery of Broina felt like a ghost himself; shade of a madman flitting hopelessly to the citadel of Earth's disinherited to recapture the resonant pipes of Killorn—weapon of the gods—before they blared forth the dirge of the world.

THE third book of the *Story of the Men of Killorn*. How Red Bram fought the Ganasthi from the lands of darkness, and Kery son of Rhiach was angered, and the pipe of the gods spoke once more.

Now it must be told of those who fared forth south under Bram the Red. This was the smallest of the parties that left Killorn, being from three clans only—Broina, Dagb, and Heorran. That made some thousand warriors, mostly men with some women

archers and slingers. But the pipe of the gods had always been with Clan Broina, and so it followed the Broina on this trek. He was Rhiach son of Glyndwyrr, and his son was Kery.

Bram was a Heorran, a man huge of height and thew, with eyes like blue ice and hair and beard like a torch. He was curt of speech and had no close friends, but men agreed that his brain and his spirit made him the best leader for a journey like this, though some thought that he paid too little respect to the gods and their priests.

For some five years these men of Killorn marched south. They went over strange hills and windy moors, through ice-blinking clefts in gaunt-cragged mountains and over brawling rivers chill with the cold of the Dark Lands.

They hunted and robbed to live, or reaped the grain of foreigners, and cheerfully cut down any who sought to gainsay them. Now and again Bram dickered with the chiefs of some or other city and hired himself and his wild men out to fight against another town. Then there would be hard battle and rich booty and flames red against the twilight sky.

Men died and some grew weary of roving and fighting. There was a sick hunger within them for rest and a hearthfire and the eternal sunset over the Lake of Killorn. These took a house and a woman and stayed by the road. In such ways did Bram's army shrink. On the other hand most of his warriors finally took some or other woman along on the march and she would demand more for herself and the babies than a roof of clouds and wind. So there came to be tents and wagons, with children playing between the turning wheels. Bram grumbled about this, it made his army slower and clumsier, but there was little he could do to prevent it.

Those who were boys when the trek began became men with the years and the battles and the many miles. Among these was the Kery of whom we speak. He grew tall and lithe and slender, with the fair skin and slant blue eyes and long ash-blond hair of the Broina, broad of forehead and cheekbones, straight-nosed, beardless like most of his clan.

He was swift and deadly with sword,

spear, or bow, merry with his comrades over ale and campfire, clever to play harp or pipe and make verses—not much different from the others, save that he came of the Broina and would one day carry the pipe of the gods. And while the legends of Killorn said that all men are the offspring of a goddess whom a warrior devil once bore off to his lair, it was held that the Broina had a little more demon blood in them than most.

Always Kery bore within his heart a dream. He was still a stripling when they wandered from home. He had reached young manhood among hoofs and wheels and dusty roads, battle and roaming and the glimmer of campfires, but he never forgot Killorn of the purple hills and the far thundering sea and the lake where it was forever sunset. For there had been a girl of the Dagb sept, and she had stayed behind.

But then the warriors came to Ryvan and their doom.

IT WAS a broad fair country into which they had come. Trending south and east, away from the sun, they were on the darker edge of the Twilight Lands and the day was no longer visible at all. Only the deep silver-blue dusk lay around them and above, with black night and glittering stars to the east and a few high clouds lit by unseen sunbeams to the west. But it was still light enough for Twilight Landers' eyes to reach the horizon—to see fields and woods and rolling hills and the far metal gleam of a river. They were well into the territory of Ryvan city.

Rumor ran before them on frightened feet, and peasants often fled as they advanced. But never had they met such emptiness as now. They had passed deserted houses, gutted farmsteads, and the bones of the newly slain, and had shifted their course eastward to get into wilder country where there should at least be game. But such talk as they had heard of the invaders of Ryvan made them march warily. And when one of their scouts galloped back to tell of an army advancing out of the darkness against them, the great horns screamed and the wagons were drawn together.

For a while there was chaos, running and yelling men, crying children, bawling cattle, and tramping hests. Then the carts were

drawn into a defensive ring atop a high steep ridge and the warriors waited outside. They made a brave sight, the men of Killorn, tall barbarians in the colorful kilts of their septs with plundered ornaments shining around corded throat or sinewy arm.

Most of them still bore the equipment of their homeland—horned helmets, gleaming ring-byrnies, round shields, ax and bow and spear and broadsword, worn and dusty with use but ready for more. The greater number went afoot, though some rode the small shaggy hests of the north. Their women and children crouched behind the wagons, with bows and slings ready and the old battle banners of Killorn floating overhead.

Kery came running to the place where the chiefs stood. He wore only a helmet and a light leather corselet, and carried sword and spear and a bow slung over his shoulders. "Father," he called. "Father, who are they?"

Rhiach of Broina stood near Bram with the great bagpipes of the gods under one arm—old beyond memory, those pipes, worn and battered, but terror and death and the avenging furies crouched in them, power so great that only one man could ever know the secret of their use. A light breeze stirred the warlock's long gray hair about his gaunt face, and his eyes brooded on the eastern darkness.

The scout who had brought word turned to greet Kery. He was panting with the weariness of his hard ride. An arrow had wounded him, and he shivered as the cold wind from the Dark Lands brushed his sweat-streaked body. "A horde," he said. "An army marching out of the east toward us, not Ryvan but such a folk as I never knew of. Their outriders saw me and barely did I get away. Most likely they will move against us, and swiftly."

"A host at least as great as ours," added Bram. "It must be a part of the invading Dark Landers who are laying Ryvan waste. It will be a hard fight, though I doubt not that with our good sword-arms and the pipe of the gods we will throw them back."

"I know not." Rhiach spoke slowly. His deep eyes were somber on Kery. "I have had ill dreams of late. If I fell in this battle, before we won . . . I did wrong,

son. I should have told you how to use the pipe."

"The law says you can only do that when you are so old that you are ready to give up your chiefship to your first born," said Bram. "It is a good law. A whole clan knowing how to wield such power would soon be at odds with all Killorn."

"But we are not in Killorn now," said Rhiach. "We have come far from home, among alien and enemy peoples, and the lake where it is forever sunset is a ghost to us." His hard face softened. "If I fall, Kery, my own spirit, I think, will wander back thither. I will wait for you at the border of the lake, I will be on the windy heaths and by the high tarns, they will hear me piping in the night and know I have come home . . . but seek your place, son, and all the gods be with you."

KERY gulped and wrung his father's hand. The warlock had ever been a stranger to him. His mother was dead these many years and Rhiach had grown grim and silent. And yet the old warlock was dearer to him than any save Morna who waited for his return.

He turned and sped to his own post, with the tyrs.

The cows of the great horned tyrs from Killorn were for meat and milk and leather, and trudged meekly enough behind the wagons. But the huge black bulls were wicked and had gored more than one man to death. Still Kery had gotten the idea of using them in battle. He had made iron plates for their chests and shoulders. He had polished their cruel horns and taught them to charge when he gave the word. No other man in the army dared go near them, but Kery could guide them with a whistle. For the men of Broina were warlocks.

They snorted in the twilight as he neared them, stamping restlessly and shaking their mighty heads. He laughed in a sudden reckless drunkenness of power and moved up to his big lovely Gorwain and scratched the bull behind the ears.

"Softly, softly," he whispered, standing in the dusk among the crowding black bulks. "Patient, my beauty, wait but a little and I'll slip you, O wait, my Gorwain."

Spears blinked in the shadowy light and

voices rumbled quietly. The bulls and the hests snorted, stamping and shivering in the thin chill wind flowing from the lands of night. They waited.

Presently they heard, faint and far, the skirling of war pipes. But it was not the wild joyous music of Killorn, it was a thin shrill note which ran along the nerves, jagged as a saw, and the thump of drums and the clangor of gongs came with it. Kery sprang up on the broad shoulders of Gorwain the tyr and strained into the gloom to see.

Over the rolling land came marching the invaders. It was an army of a thousand or so, he guessed with a shiver of tension, moving in closer ranks and with tighter discipline than the barbarians. He had seen many armies, from the naked yelling savages of the upper Norlan hills to the armored files of civilized towns, yet never one like this.

Dark Landers, he thought bleakly. *Out of the cold and the night that never ends, out of the mystery and the frightened legends of a thousand years, here at last are the men of the Dark Lands, spilling into the Twilight like their own icy winds, and have we anything that can stand against them?*

They were tall, as tall as the northerners, but gaunt, with a stringy toughness born of hardship and suffering and bitter chill. Their skins were white, not with the ruddy whiteness of the northern Twilight Landers but dead-white, blank and bare, and the long hair and beards were the color of silver.

Their eyes were the least human thing about them, huge and round and golden, the eyes of a bird of prey, deep sunken in the narrow skulls. Their faces seemed strangely immobile, as if the muscles for laughter and weeping were alike frozen. As they moved up, the only sound was the tramp of their feet and the demon whine of their pipes and the clash of drum and gong.

They were well equipped, Kery judged; they wore close-fitting garments of fur-trimmed leather, trousers and boots and hooded tunics. Underneath he glimpsed mail, helmets, shields, and they carried all the weapons he knew—no cavalry, but they marched with a sure tread. Overhead floated a strange banner, a black standard

with a jagged golden streak across it.

Kery's muscles and nerves tightened to thrumming alertness. He crouched by his lead bull, one hand gripping the hump and the other white-knuckled around his spear-shaft. And there was a great hush on the ranks of Killorn as they waited.

Closer came the strangers, until they were in bowshot. Kery heard the snap of tautening strings. *Will Bram never give the signal? Gods, is he waiting for them to walk up and kiss us?*

A trumpet brayed from the enemy ranks, and Kery saw the cloud of arrows rise whistling against the sky. At the same time Bram winded his horn and the air grew loud with war shouts and the roar of arrow flocks.

Then the strangers locked shields and charged.

II

THE men of Killorn stood their ground, shoulder to shoulder, pikes braced and swords aloft. They had the advantage of high ground and meant to use it. From behind their ranks came a steady hail of arrows and stones, whistling through the air to crack among the enemy ranks and tumble men to earth—yet still the Dark Landers came, leaping and bounding and running with strange precision. They did not yell, and their faces were blank as white stone, but behind them the rapid thud of their drums rose to a pulse-shaking roar.

"Hai-ah!" bellowed red Bram. "Sunder them!"

The great long-shafted ax shrieked in his hands, belled on an enemy helmet and crashed through into skull and brain and shattering jawbone. Again he smote, sideways, and a head leaped from its shoulders.

A Dark Land warrior thrust for his belly. He kicked one booted foot out and sent the man lurching back into his own ranks. Whirling, he hewed down one who engaged the Killorner beside him. A foeman sprang against him as he turned, chopping at his leg. With a roar that lifted over the clashing racket of battle, Bram turned, the ax already flying in his hands, and cut the stranger down.

His red beard blazed like a torch over the struggle as it swayed back and forth. His streaming ax was a lightning bolt that rose and fell and rose again, and the thunder of metal on breaking metal rolled between the hills.

Kery stood by his tyrs, bow in hand, shooting and shooting into the masses that roiled about him. None came too close, and he could not leave his post lest the unchained bulls stampede. He shuddered with the black fury of battle. When would Bram call the charge. How long? Zip, zip, gray-feathered death winging into the tide that rolled up to the wagons and fell back and resurged over its corpses.

The men of Killorn were yelling and cursing as they fought, but the Dark Landers made never a sound save for the hoarse gasping of breath and the muted groans of the wounded. It was like fighting demons, yellow-eyed and silver-bearded and with no soul in their bony faces. The northerners shivered and trembled and hewed with a desperate fury of loathing.

Back and forth the battle swayed, roar of axes and whine of arrows and harsh iron laughter of swords. Kery stood firing and firing, the need to fight was a bitter catch in his throat. How long to wait, how long, how long?

Why didn't Rhiach blow the skirl of death on the pipes? Why not fling them back with the horror of disintegration in their bones, and then rush out to finish them?

Kery knew well that the war-song of the gods was only to be played in time of direst need, for it hurt friend almost as much as foe—but even so, even so! A few shaking bars, to drive the enemy back in death and panic, and then the sortie to end them!

Of a sudden he saw a dozen Dark Landers break from the main battle by the wagons and approach the spot where he stood. He shot two swift arrows, threw his spear, and pulled out his sword with a savage laughter in his heart, the demonic battle joy of the Broina. Ha, let them come!

The first sprang with downward-whistling blade. Kery twisted aside, letting speed and skill be his shield, his long glaive flickered out and the enemy screamed as it took off

his arm. Whirling, Kery spat the second through the throat. The third was on him before he could withdraw his blade, and a fourth from the other side, raking for his vitals. He sprang back.

"Gorwain!" he shouted. "*Gorwain!*"

The huge black bull heard. His fellows snorted and shivered, but stayed at their place—Kery didn't know how long they would wait, he prayed they would stay a moment more. The lead tyr ran up beside his master, and the ground trembled under his cloven hoofs.

The white foemen shrank back, still dead of face but with fear plain in their bodies. Gorwain snorted, an explosion of thunder, and charged them.

There was an instant of flying bodies, tattered flesh ripped by the horns, and ribs snapping underfoot. The Dark Landers thrust with their spears, the points glanced off the armor plating and Gorwain turned and slew them.

"Here!" cried Kery sharply. "Back, Gorwain! Here!"

The tyr snorted and circled, rolling his eyes. The killing madness was coming over him, if he were not stopped now he might charge friend or foe.

"Gorwain!" screamed Kery.

Slowly, trembling under his shining black hide, the bull returned.

AND now Rhiach the warlock stood up behind the ranks of Killorn. Tall and steely gray, he went out between them, the pipes in his arms and the mouthpieces at his lips. For an instant the Dark Landers wavered, hesitating to shoot at him, and then he blew.

It was like the snarling music of any bagpipe, and yet there was more in it. There was a boiling tide of horror riding the notes, men's hearts faltered and weakness turned their muscles watery. Higher rose the music, and stronger and louder, screaming in the dales, and before men's eyes the world grew unreal, shivering beneath them, the rocks faded to mist and the trees groaned and the sky shook. They fell toward the ground, holding their ears, half blind with unreasoning fear and with the pain of the giant hand that gripped their bones and shook them, shook them.

The Dark Landers reeled back, falling, staggering, and many of those who toppled were dead before they hit the earth. Others milled in panic, the army was becoming a mob. The world groaned and trembled and tried to dance to the demon music.

Rhiach stopped. Bram shook his bull head to clear the ringing and the fog in it. "At them!" he roared. "*Charge!*"

Sanity came back. The land was real and solid again, and men who were used to the terrible drone of the pipes could force strength back into shuddering bodies. With a great shout, the warriors of Killorn formed ranks and moved forward.

Kery leaped up on the back of Gorwain, straddling the armored chine and gripping his knees into the mighty flanks. His sword blazed in the air. "Now kill them, my beauties!" he howled.

In a great wedge, with Gorwain at their lead, the tyrs rushed out on the foe. Earth shook under the rolling thunder of their feet. Their bellowing filled the land and clamored at the gates of the sky. They poured like a black tide down on the Dark Land host and hit it.

"Hoo-ah!" cried Kery.

He felt the shock of running into that mass of men and he clung tighter, holding on with one hand while his sword whistled in the other. Bodies fountained before the rush of the bulls, horns tossed men into the heavens and hoofs pounded them into the earth. Kery swung at dimly glimpsed heads, the hits shivered along his arm but he could not see if he killed anyone, there wasn't time.

Through and through the Dark Land army the bulls plowed, goring a lane down its middle while the Killorners fell on it from the front. Blood and thunder and erupting violence, death reaping the foe, and Kery rode onward.

"Oh, my beauties, my black sweethearts, horn them, stamp them into the ground. Oh, lovely, lovely, push them on, my Gorwain, knock them down to hell, best of bulls!"

The tyrs came out on the other side of the broken host and thundered on down the ridge. Kery fought to stop them. He yelled and whistled, but he knew such a charge could not expend itself in a moment.

As they rushed on, he heard the high brazen call of a trumpet, and then another and another, and a new war-cry rising behind him. What was that? What had happened?

They were down in a rocky swale before he had halted the charge. The bulls stood shivering then, foam and blood streaked their heaving sides. Slowly, with many curses and blows, he got them turned, but they would only walk back up the long hill.

As he neared the battle again he saw that another force had attacked the Dark Landers from behind. It must have come through the long ravine to the west, which would have concealed its approach from those fighting Southern Twilight Landers. Kery saw, well trained and equipped though they seemed to fight wearily. But between men of north and south, the easterners were being cut down in swathes. Before he could get back, the remnants of their host was in full flight. Bram was too busy with the newcomers to pursue and they soon were lost in the eastern darkness.

KERY dismounted and led his bulls to the wagons to tie them up. They went through a field of corpses, heaped and piled on the blood-soaked earth, but most of the dead were enemies. Here and there the wounded cried out in the twilight, and the women of Killorn were going about succoring their own hurt. Carrion birds hovered above on darkling wings.

"Who are those others?" asked Kery of Bram's wife Eiyla. She was a big raw-boned woman, somewhat of a scold but stout-hearted and the mother of tall sons. She stood leaning on an unstrung bow and looking over the suddenly hushed landscape.

"Ryvianians, I think," she replied absently. Then, "Kery—Kery, I have ill news for you."

His heart stumbled and there was a sudden coldness within him. Mutely, he waited.

"Rhiach is dead, Kery," she said gently. "An arrow took him in the throat even as the Dark Landers fled."

His voice seemed thick and clumsy. "Where is he?"

She led him inside the laager of wagons. A fire had been lit to boil water, and its red glow danced over the white faces of women

and children and wounded men where they lay. To one side the dead had been stretched, and white-headed Lochly of Dagh stood above them with his bagpipes couched in his arms.

Kery knelt over Rhiach. The warlock's bleak features had softened a little in death, he seemed gentle now. But quiet, so pale and quiet. And soon the earth will open to receive you, you will be laid to rest here in an alien land where the life slipped from your hands, and the high windy tarns of Killorn will not know you ever again, O Rhiach the Piper.

Farewell, farewell, my father. Sleep well, goodnight, goodnight!

Slowly, Kery brushed the gray hair back from Rhiach's forehead, and knelt and kissed him on the brow. They had laid the god-pipe beside him, and he took this up and stood numbly, wondering what he would do with this thing in his hands.

Old Lochly gave him a somber stare. His voice came so soft you could scarce hear it over the thin whispering wind.

"Now you are the Broina, Kery, and thus the Piper of Killorn."

"I know," he said dully.

"But you know not how to blow the pipes, do you? No, no man does that. Since Broina himself had them from Llugan Longsword in heaven, there has been one who knew their use, and he was the shield of all Killorn. But now that is ended, and we are alone among strangers and enemies."

"It is not good. But we must do what we can."

"Oh, aye. 'Tis scarcely your fault, Kery. But I fear none of us will ever drink the still waters of the lake where it is forever sunset again."

Lochly put his own pipes to his lips and the wild despair of the old coronach wailed forth over the hushed camp.

Kery slung the god-pipes over his back and wandered out of the laager toward Bram and the Ryvanians.

III

THE southern folk were more civilized, with cities and books, and strange arts, though the northerners thought it spiritless of them to knuckle under to their kings as

abstractly as they did. Hereabouts the people were dark of hair and eyes, though still light of skin like all Twilight Landers, and shorter and stockier than in the north. These soldiers made a brave showing with polished cuirass and plumed helmet and oblong shields, and they had a strong cavalry mounted on tall hests, and trumpeters and standard bearers and engineers. They outnumbered the Killorners by a good three to one, and stood in close, suspicious ranks.

Approaching them, Kery thought that his people were, after all, invaders of Ryvan themselves. If this new army decided to fall on the tired and disorganized barbarians, whose strongest weapon had just been taken from them, it could be slaughter. He stiffened himself, thrusting thought of Rhiach far back into his mind, and strode boldly forward.

As he neared he saw that however well armed and trained the Ryvanians were they were also weary and dusty, and they had many hurt among them. Beneath their taut bearing was a hollowness. They had the look of beaten men.

Bram and the Dagh, tall gray Nessa, were parleying with the Ryvanian general, who had ridden forward and sat looking coldly down on them. The Heorran carried his huge ax over one mailed shoulder, but had the other hand lifted in sign of peace. At Kery's approach, he turned briefly and nodded.

"Well you came," he said. "This is a matter for the heads of all three clans, and you are the Broina now. I grieve for Rhiach, and still more do I grieve for poor Killorn, but we must put a bold face on it lest they fall on us."

Kery nodded, gravely as fitted an elder. The incongruity of it was like a blow. Why, he was a boy—there were men of Broina in the train twice and thrice his age—and he held leadership over them!

But Rhiach was dead, and Kery was the last living of his sons. Hunger and war and the coughing sickness had taken all the others, and so now he spoke for his clan.

He turned a blue gaze up toward the Ryvanian general. This was a tall man, big as a northerner but quiet and graceful in his movements, and the inbred haughtiness of generations was stiff within him. A torn

purple cloak and a gilt helmet were his only special signs of rank, otherwise he wore the plain armor of a mounted man, but he wore it like a king. His face was dark for a Twilight Lander, lean and strong and deeply lined, with a proud high-bridged nose and a long hard jaw and close-cropped black hair finely streaked with gray. He alone in that army seemed utterly undaunted by whatever it was that had broken their spirits.

"This is Kery son of Rhiach, chief of the third of our clans," Bram introduced him. He used the widespread Aluardian language of the southlands, which was also the tongue of Ryvan and which most of the Killorners had picked up in the course of their wanderings. "And Kery, he says he is Jonan, commander under Queen Sathi of the army of Ryvan, and that this is a force sent out from the city which became aware of the battle we were having and took the opportunity of killing a few more Dark Landers."

Nessa of Dagh looked keenly at the southerners. "Methinks there's more to it than that," he said, half to his fellows and half to Jonan. "You've been in a stiff battle and come off second best, if looks tell aught. Were I to make a further venture, it would be that while you fought clear of the army that beat you and are well ahead of pursuit, it's still on your tail and you have to reach the city fast."

"That will do," snapped Jonan. "We have heard of you plundering bandits from the north, and have no intention of permitting you on Ryvanian soil. If you turn back at once, you may go in peace, but otherwise . . ."

Casting a glance behind him, Bram saw that his men were swiftly reforming their own lines. They sensed the uneasiness in the air. If the worst came to the worst, they'd give a fearsome account of themselves. And it was plain that Jonan knew it.

"We are wanderers, yes," said the chief steadily, "but we are not highwaymen save when necessity drives us to it. It would better fit you to let us, who have just broken a fair-sized host of your deadly enemies, proceed in peace. We do not wish to fight you, but if we must it will be all the worse for you."

"Ill-armed barbarians, a third of our

number, threatening us?" asked Jonan scornfully.

"Well, now, suppose you can overcome us," said Nessa with a glacial cheerfulness. "I doubt it, but just suppose so. We will not account for less than one man apiece of yours, you know, and you can hardly spare so many with Dark Landers ravaging all your country. Furthermore, a battle with us could well last so long that those who follow you will catch up, and there is an end of all of us."

KERY took a breath and added flatly, "You must have felt the piping we can muster at need. Well for you that we only played it a short while. If we chose to play you a good long dirge . . ."

Bram cast him an approving glance, nodded, and said stiffly, "So you see, General Jonan, we mean to go on our way, and it would best suit you to bid us a friendly good-bye."

The Ryvanian scowled blackly and sat for a moment in thought. The wind stirred his best's mane and tail and the scarlet plume on his helmet. Finally he asked them in a bitter voice, "What do you want here, anyway? Why did you come south?"

"It is a long story, and this is no place to talk," said Bram. "Suffice it that we seek land. Not much land, nor for too many years, but a place to live in peace till we can return to Killorn."

"Hm." Jonan frowned again. "It is a hard position for me. I cannot simply let a band famous for robbery go loose. Yet it is true enough that I would not welcome a long and difficult fight just now. What shall I do with you?"

"You will just have to let us go," grinned Nessa.

"No! I think you have lied to me on several counts, barbarians. Half of what you say is bluff, and I could wipe you out if I had to."

"Methinks somewhat more than half of your words are bluff," murmured Kery.

Jonan gave him an angry look, then suddenly whirled on Bram. "Look here. Neither of us can well afford a battle, yet neither trusts the other out of its sight. There is only one answer. We must proceed together to Ryvan city."

"Eh? Are you crazy, man? Why, as soon as we were in sight of your town, you could summon all its garrison out against us."

"You must simply trust me not to do that. If you have heard anything about Queen Sathi, you will know that she would never permit it. Nor can we spare too many forces. Frankly, the city is going to be under siege very soon."

"Is it that bad?" asked Bram.

"Worse," said Jonan gloomily.

Nessa nodded his shrewd gray head. "I've heard some tales of Sathi," he agreed. "They do say she's honorable."

"And I have heard that you people have served as mercenaries before now," said Jonan quickly, "and we need warriors so cruelly that I am sure some arrangement can be made here. It could even include the land you want, if we are victorious, for the Ganasthi have wasted whole territories. So this is my proposal—march with us to Ryvan, in peace, and there discuss terms with her majesty for taking service under her flag." His harsh dark features grew suddenly cold. "Or, if you refuse, bearing in mind that Ryvan has very little to lose after all, I will fall on you this instant."

Bram scratched his red beard, and looked over the southern ranks and especially the engines. Flame-throwing ballistae could make ruin of the laager. Jonan galled him, and yet—well—however they might bluff about it, the fact remained that they had very little choice.

And anyway, the suggestion about payment in land sounded good. And if these—Ganasthi—had really overrun the Ryvanian empire, then there was little chance in any case of the Killorners getting much further south.

"Well," said Bram mildly, "we can at least talk about it—at the city."

NOW the wagons, which the barbarians would not abandon in spite of Jonan's threats, were swiftly hitched again and the long train started its creaking way over the hills. Erelong they came on one of the paved imperial roads, a broad empty way that ran straight as a spearshaft southwestward to Ryvan city. Then they made rapid progress.

In truth, thought Kery, they went through a wasted land. Broad fields were

blackened with fire, corpses sprawled in the embers of farmsteads, villages were deserted and gutted—everywhere folk had fled before the hordes of Ryvan. Twice they saw red glows on the southern horizon and white-lipped soldiers told Kery that those were burning cities.

As they marched west the sky lightened before them until at last a clear white glow betokened that the sun was just below the curve of the world. It was a fair land of rolling plains and low hills, fields and groves and villages, but empty—empty. Now and again a few homeless peasants stared with frightened eyes at their passage, or trailed along in their wake, but otherwise there was only the wind and the rain and the hollow thudding of their feet.

Slowly Kery got the tale of Ryvan. The city had spread itself far in earlier days, conquering many others, but its rule was just. The conquered became citizens themselves and the strong armies protected all. The young queen Sathi was nearly worshipped by her folk. But then the Ganasthi came.

"About a year ago it was," said one man. "They came out of the darkness in the east, a horde of them, twice as many as we could muster. We've always had some trouble with Dark Landers on our eastern border, you know, miserable barbarians making forays which we beat off without too much trouble. And most of them told of pressure from some powerful nation, Ganasthi, driving them from their own homes and forcing them to fall on us. But we never thought too much of it. Not before it was too late.

"We don't know much about Ganasthi. It seems to be a fairly civilized state, somewhere out there in the cold and the dark. How they ever became civilized with nothing but howling savages around them I'll never imagine. But they've built up a power like Ryvan's, only bigger. It seems to include conscripts from many Dark Land tribes who're only too glad to leave their miserable frozen wastes and move into our territory. Their armies are as well trained and equipped as our own, and they fight like demons. Those war-gongs, and those dead faces . . ."

He shuddered.

"The prisoners we've taken say they aim

to take over all the Twilight Lands. They're starting with Ryvan—it's the strongest state, and once they've knocked us over the rest will be easy. We've appealed for help to other nations but they're all too afraid, too busy raising their own silly defenses, to do anything. So for the past year the war's been raging up and down our empire." He waved a hand, wearily, at the blasted landscape. "You see what that's meant. Famine and plague are starting to hit us now—"

"And you could never stand before them?" asked Kery.

"Oh, yes, we had our victories and they had theirs. But when we won a battle they'd just retreat and sack some other area. They've been living off the country—our country—the devils!" The soldier's face twisted. "My own little sister was in Aquilaea when they took that. When I think of those white-haired fiends—"

"Well about a month ago, the great battle was fought. Jonan led the massed forces of Ryvan out and caught the main body of Ganasthi at Seven Rivers, in the Donam Hills. I was there. The fight lasted, oh, four sleeps maybe, and nobody gave quarter or asked it. We outnumbered them a little, but they finally won. They slaughtered us like driven cattle. Jonan was lucky to pull half his forces out of there. The rest left their bones at Seven Rivers. Since then we've been a broken nation.

"We're pulling all we have left back toward Ryvan in the hope of holding it till a miracle happens. Do you have any miracles for sale, Northman?" The soldier laughed bitterly.

"What about this army here?" asked Kery.

"We still make sorties, you know. This one went out from Ryvan city a few sleeps past to the relief of Tusca, which our scouts said the Ganasthi were besieging with only a small force. But an enemy army intercepted us on the way. We cut our way out and shook them, but they're on our tail in all likelihood. When we chanced to hear the noise of your fight with the invaders we took the opportunity . . . Almighty Dyuus, it was good to hack them down and see them run!"

The soldier shrugged. "But what good did it do, really? What chance have we got?

That was a good magic you had at the fight. I thought my heart was going to stop when that demon music started. But can you pipe your way out of hell, barbarian? Can you?"

IV

RYVAN was a fair city, with terraced gardens and high shining towers to be seen over the white walls, and it lay among wide fields not yet ravaged by the enemy. But around it, under its walls, spilling out over the land, huddled the miserable shacks and tents of those who had fled hither and could find no room within the town till the foe came over the horizon—the broken folk, the ragged horror-ridden peasants who stared mutely at the defeated army as it streamed through the gates.

The men of Killorn made camp under one wall and soon their fires smudged the deep silver-blue sky and their warriors stood guard against the Ryvanians. They did not trust even these comrades in woe, for they came of the fat southlands and the wide highways and the iron legions, and not of Killorn and its harsh windy loneliness.

Before long word came that the barbarian leaders were expected at the palace. So Bram, Nessa, and Kery put on their polished byrnies, and over them tunics and cloaks of their best plunder. They slung their swords over their shoulders and mounted their hests and rode between two squads of Ryvanian guardsmen through the gates and into the city.

It was packed and roiling with those who had fled. Crowds surged aimlessly around the broad avenues and spilled into the colonnaded temples and the looming apartments and even the gardens and villas of the nobility.

There was the dusty, bearded peasant, clinging to his wife and his children and looking on the world with frightened eyes. Gaily decked noble, riding through the mob with patrician hauteur and fear underneath it. Fat merchant and shaven priest, glowering at the refugees who came in penniless to throng the city and must, by the queen's orders, be fed and housed. Patrolling soldiers, striving to keep order in the mindless whirlpool of man, their young faces drawn and their shoulders stooped be-

neath their mail. Jugglers, mountebanks, thieves, harlots, tavern-keepers, plying their trades in the feverish gaiety of doom; a human storm foaming off into strange half-glimpsed faces in darkened alleys and eddying crowds, the unaccountable aliens who flit through all great cities—the world seemed gathered at Ryvan, and huddling before the wrath that came.

Fear rode the city, Kery could feel it, he breathed and the air was dank with terror, he bristled animal-like and laid a hand to his sword. For an instant he remembered Killorn, the wide lake rose before him and he stood at its edge, watching the breeze ruffle it and hearing the whisper of reeds and the chuckle of water on a pebbled shore. Miles about lay the hills and the moors, the clean strong smell of ling was a drunkenness in his nostrils. It was silent save for the small cool wind that ruffled Morna's hair. And in the west it was sunset, the mighty sun-disc lay just below the horizon and a shifting, drifting riot of colors, flame of red and green and molten gold, burned in the twilight heavens.

He shook his head, feeling his longing as a sharp clear pain, and urged his hest through the crowds. Presently they reached the palace.

It was long and low and gracious, crowded now since all the nobles and their households had moved into it and, under protest, turned their own villas over to the homeless. Dismounting, the northerners walked between files of guardsmen, through fragrant gardens and up the broad marble steps of the building—through long corridors and richly furnished rooms, and finally into the audience chamber of Queen Sathi.

It was like a chalice of white stone, wrought in loveliness and brimming with twilight and stillness. That deep blue dusk lay cool and mysterious between the high slim pillars, and somewhere came the rippling of a harp and the singing of birds and fountains. Kery felt suddenly aware of his uncouth garments and manners and accent. His tongue thickened and he did not know what to do with his hands. Awkwardly he took off his helmet.

"Lord Bram of Killorn, your majesty," said the chamberlain.

"Greeting, and welcome," said Sathi.

WORD had spread far about Ryvan's young queen but Kery thought dazedly that the gossips had spoken less of her than was truth. She was tall and lithe and sweetly formed, with strength slumbering deep under the wide soft mouth and the lovely curves of cheeks and forehead. Blood of the Sun Lands darkened her hair to a glowing blue-black and tinted her skin with gold, there was fire from the sun within her. Like other southern women, she dressed more boldly than the girls of Killorn, a sheer gown falling from waist to ankles, a thin veil over the shoulders, little jewelry. She needed no ornament.

She could not be very much older than he, if at all, thought Kery. He caught her great dark eyes on him and felt a slow hot flush go up his face. With an effort he checked himself and stood very straight, with his strange blue eyes like cold flames.

Beside Sathi sat the general, Jonan, and there were a couple of older men who seemed to be official advisors. But it soon was clear that only the queen and the soldier had much to say in this court.

Bram's voice boomed out, shattering the peace of the blue dusk. For all his great size and ruddy beard he seemed lost in the ancient grace of the chamber. He spoke too loudly. He stood too stiff. "Thank you, my lady. But I am no lord, I simply head this group of the men of Killorn." He waved clumsily at his fellows. "These are Nessa of Dagh and Kery of Broina."

"Be seated, then, and welcome again." Sathi's voice was low and musical. She signaled her servants to bring wine.

"We have heard of great wanderings in the north," she went on, when they had drunk. "But those lands are little known to us. What brought you so far from home?"

Nessa, who had the readiest tongue, answered. "There was famine in the land, your majesty. For three years drought and cold lay like iron over Killorn. We hungered and the coughing sickness came over many of us. Not all our magics and sacrifices availed to end our misery, they seemed only to raise great storms that destroyed what little we had kept.

"Then the weather smiled again, but as often happens the gray blight came in the wake of the hard years. It reaped our grain

before we could, the stalks withered and crumbled before our eyes, and wild beasts came in hunger-driven swarms to raid our dwindling flocks. There was scarce food enough for a quarter of our starving folk. We knew, from what had happened in other lands, that the gray blight will waste a country for years, five or ten, leaving only perhaps a third part of the crop alive at each harvest. Then it passes away and does not come again. But meanwhile the land will not bear many folk.

"So in the end the clans decided that most must move away leaving only the few who could keep alive through the niggard years to hold the country for us. Hearts broke in twain, your majesty, for the hills and the moors and the lake where it is forever sunset were part of us. We are of that land and if we die away from it our ghosts will wander home. But go we must, lest all die."

"Yes, go on," said Jonan impatiently when he paused.

Bram gave him an angry look and took up the story. "Four hosts were to wander out of the land and see what would befall. If they found a place to stay they would abide there till the evil time was over. Otherwise they would live however they could. It lay with the gods, my lady, and we have traveled far from the realms of our gods.

"One host went eastward, into the great forests of Norla. One got ships and sailed west, out into the Day Lands where some of our adventurers had already explored a little way. One followed the coast south-westward, through country beyond our ken. And ours marched due south. And so we have wandered for five years."

"Homeless," whispered Sathi, and Kery thought her eyes grew bright with tears.

"Barbarian robbers!" snapped Jonan. "I know of the havoc they have wrought on their way."

"And what would you have done," growled Bram. Jonan gave him a stiff glare, but he rushed on, "Your majesty, we have taken only what we needed . . ."

And whatever else struck our fancy, thought Kery in a moment's wryness.

"—and much of our fighting has been done for honest pay. We want only a place

to live a few years, land to farm as free yeomen, and we will defend the country which shelters us as long as we are in it. We are too few to take that land and hold it against a whole nation—that is why we have not settled down ere this—but on the march we will scatter any army in the world or leave our corpses for carrion birds. The men of Killorn keep faith with friends and foes alike, help to the one and harm to the other.

"Now we saw many fair fields in Ryvan where we could be at home. The Ganasthi have cleared off the owners for us. So we offer you this—give us the land we need and we will fight for you against these Ganasthi or any other foes while blood runs through our hearts. Refuse us and we may be able to make friends with the Dark Landers instead. For friends we must have."

"You see?" snarled Jonan. "He threatens banditry."

"No, no, you are too hasty," replied Sathi. "He is simply telling the honest truth. And the gods know we need warriors."

"This general was anxious enough for our help out there in the eastern marches," said Kery suddenly.

"Enough, barbarian," said Jonan with ice in his tones.

Color flared in Sathi's cheeks. "Enough of you, Jonan. These are brave and honest men, and our guests, and our sorely needed allies. We will draw up the treaty at once."

The general shrugged, insolently. Kery was puzzled. There was anger here, crackling under a hard-held surface, but it seemed new and strange. *Why?*

They haggled for a while over terms, Nessa doing most of the talking for Killorn. He and Bram would not agree that clansmen should owe fealty or even respect to any noble of Ryvan save the queen herself. Also they should have the right to go home whenever they heard the famine was over. Sathi was willing enough to concede it but Jonan had to be almost beaten down. Finally he gave grudging assent and the queen had her scribes draw the treaty up on parchment.

"That is not how we do it in Killorn," said Bram. "A tyr must be sacrificed and

vows made on the ring of Llutan and the pipes of the gods."

Sathi smiled. "Very well, Red One," she nodded. "We will make the pledge thusly too, if you wish." With a sudden flame of bitterness, "What difference does it make? What difference does anything make now?"

V

NOW the armies of Ganasth moved against Ryvan city itself. From all the plundered empire they streamed in, to ring the town in a living wall and hem the defenders within a fence of spears. And when the whole host was gathered, which took about ten sleeps from the time the Killorners arrived, they stormed the city.

Up the long slope of the hills on which Ryvan stood they came, running, bounding, holding up shields against the steady hail of missiles from the walls. Forward, silent and blank-faced, no noise in them save the crashing of thousands of feet and the high demon-music of their warmaking—dying, strewing the ground with their corpses, but leaping over the fallen and raging against the walls.

Up ladders! Rams thundering at the gates! Men springing to the top of walls and toppling before the defenders and more of them snarling behind!

Back and forth the battle raged, now the Ryvanians driven back to the streets and rooftops, now the Dark Landers pressed to the edge of the walls and pitchforked over. Houses began to burn, here and there, and it was Sathi who made fire brigades out of those who could not fight. Kery had a glimpse of her from afar, as he battled on the outer parapets, a swift and golden loveliness against the leaping red.

After long and vicious fighting the northern gate went down. But Bram had foreseen this. He had pulled most of his barbarians thither, with Kery's bulls in their lead. He planted them well back and had a small stout troop on either side of the great buckling doors. When the barrier sagged on its hinges, the Ganasthi roared in unopposed, streaming through the entrance and down the broad bloody avenue.

Then the Killorners thrust from the side,

pinching off the several hundred who had entered. They threw great jars of oil on the broken gates and set them ablaze, a barrier of flame which none could cross. And then Kery rode his bulls against the enemy, and behind him came the might of Killorn.

It was raw slaughter. Erelong they were hunting the foe up and down the streets and spearing them like wild animals. Meanwhile Bram got some engineers from Jonan's force who put up a temporary barricade in the now open gateway and stood guard over it.

The storm faded, grumbled away in surges of blood and whistling arrows. Shaken by their heavy losses, the Dark Landers pulled back out of missile range, ringed the city with their watchfires, and prepared to lay siege.

There was jubilation in Ryvan. Men shouted and beat their dented shields with nicked and blunted swords. They tossed their javelins in the air, emptied wineskins, and kissed the first and best girl who came to hand. Weary, bleeding, reft of many good comrades, and given at best a reprieve, the folk still snatched at what laughter remained.

Bram came striding to meet the queen. He was a huge and terrible figure stiff with dried blood, the ax blinking on his shoulder and the other hairy paw clamped on the neck of a tall Dark Lander whom he helped along with an occasional kick. Yet Sathi's dark eyes trailed to the slim form of Kery, following in the chief's wake and too exhausted to say much.

"I caught this fellow in the streets, my lady," said Bram merrily, "and since he seemed to be a leader I thought I'd better hang on to him for a while."

The invader stood motionless, regarding them with a chill yellow stare in which there lay an iron pride. He was tall and well-built, his black mail silver-trimmed, a silver star on the battered black helmet. The snowy hair and beard stirred faintly in the breeze.

"An aristocrat, I would say," nodded Sathi. She herself seemed almost too tired to stand. She was smudged with smoke and her dress was torn and her small hands bleeding from their recent burdens. But she pulled herself erect and fought to speak

steadily. "Yes, he may well be of value to us. That was good work. Aye, you men of Killorn fought nobly, without you we might well have lost the city. It was a good month when you came."

"It was no way to fight," snapped Jonan. He was tired and wounded himself, but there was no comradeship in the look he gave the northerners. "The risk of it—why, if you hadn't been able to seal the gate behind them, Ryvan would have fallen then and there."

"I did not see you doing much of anything when the gate was splintering before them," answered Bram curtly. "As it is, my lady, we've inflicted such heavy losses on them that I doubt they'll consider another attempt at storming. Which gives us, at least, time to try something else." He yawned mightily. "Time to sleep!"

JONAN stepped up close to the prisoner and they exchanged a long look. There was no way to read the Dark Lander's thoughts but Kery thought he saw a tension under the general's hard-held features.

"I don't know what value a food-eating prisoner is to us when he can't even speak our language," said the Ryvanian. "However, I can take him in charge if you wish."

"Do," she nodded dully.

"Odd if he couldn't talk any Aluardian at all," said Kery. "Wanderers through alien lands almost have to learn. The leaders of invading armies ought to know the tongue of their enemy, or at least have interpreters." He grinned with the cold savagery of the Broina. "Let the women of Killorn, the ones who've lost husbands today, have him for a while. I daresay he'll soon discover he knows your speech—whatever is left of him."

"No," said Jonan flatly. He signalled to a squad of his men. "Take this fellow down to the palace dungeons and give him something to eat. I'll be along later."

Kery started to protest but Sathi laid a hand on his arm. He felt how it was still bleeding a little and grew silent.

"Let Jonan take care of it," she said, her voice flat with weariness. "We all need rest now—O gods, to sleep!"

The Killorners had moved their wagons into the great forum and camped there,

much to the disgust of the aristocrats and to the pleasure of whatever tavern keepers and unattached young women lived nearby. But Sathi had insisted that their three chiefs should be honored guests at the palace and it pleased them well enough to have private chambers and plenty of servants and the best of wine.

Kery woke in his bed and lay for a long while, drowsing and thinking the wanderous thoughts of half-asleep. When he got up he groaned for he was stiff with his wounds and the long fury of battle. A slave came in and rubbed him with oil and brought him a barbarian-sized meal, after which he felt better.

But now he was restless. He felt the let-down which is the aftermath of high striving. It was hard to fight back the misery and loneliness that rose in him. He prowled the room unhappily, pacing under the glowing cressets, flinging himself on a couch and then springing to his feet again. The walls were a cage.

The city was a cage, a trap, he was caught like a snared beast and never again would he walk the moors of Killorn. Sharply as a knife thrust, he remembered hunting once out in the heath. He had gone alone, with spear and bow and a shaggy half-wild cynor loping at his heels, out after antlered prey somewhere beyond the little village. Long had they roamed, he and his beast, until they were far from sight of man and only the great gray and purple and gold of the moors were around them.

The carpet under his bare feet seemed again to be the springy, pungent ling of Killorn. It was as if he smelled the sharp wild fragrance of it and felt the leaves brushing his ankles. It had been gray and windy, clouds rushed out of the west on a mounting gale. There was rain in the air and high overhead a single bird of prey had wheeled and looped on lonely wings. O almighty gods, how the wind had sung and cried to him, chilled his body with raw wet gusts and skirled in the dales and roared beneath the darkening heavens! And he had come down a long rocky slope into a wooded glen, a waterfall rushed and foamed along his path, white and green and angry black. He had sheltered in a mossy cave, lain and listened to the wind and the

rain and the crystal, ringing waterfall, and when the weather cleared he had gotten up and gone home. There had been no quarry, but by Morna of Dagh, that failure meant more to him than all his victories since!

He picked up the pipe of the gods, where it lay with his armor, and turned it over and over in his hands. Old it was, dark with age, the pipes were of some nameless iron-like wood and the bag of a leather such as was never seen now. It was worn with the uncounted generations of Broinas who had had it, men made hard and stern by their frightful trust.

It had scattered the legions of the southerners who came conquering a hundred years ago and it had quelled the raiding savages from Norla and it had gone with one-eyed Alrigh and shouted down the walls of a city. And more than once, on this last dreadful march, it had saved the men of Killorn.

Now it was dead. The Piper of Killorn had fallen and the secret had perished with him and the folk it had warded were trapped like animals to die of hunger and pestilence in a strange land—*O Rhiach, Rhiach my father, come back from the dead, come back and put the pipe to your cold lips and play the war-song of Killorn!*

Kery blew in it for the hundredth time and only a hollow whistling sounded in the belly of the instrument. Not even a decent tune, he thought bitterly.

He couldn't stay indoors, he had to get out under the sky again or go mad. Slinging the pipe over his shoulder he went out the door and up a long stairway to the palace roof gardens.

They slept all around him, sleep and silence were heavy in the long corridors, it was as if he were the last man alive and walked alone through the ruins of the world. He came out on the roof and went over to the parapet and stood looking out.

The moon was near the zenith which meant, at this longitude, that it was somewhat less than half full and would dwindle as it sank westward. It rode serene in the dusky sky adding its pale glow to the diffused light which filled all the Twilight Lands and to the white pyre of the hidden sun. The city lay dark and silent under the sky, sleeping heavily, only the muted tramp

of sentries and their ringing calls drifted up to Kery. Beyond the town burned the ominous red circle of the Ganasthi fires and he could see their tents and the black forms of their warriors.

They were settling down to a patient death watch. All the land had become silent waiting for Ryvan to die. It did not seem right that he should stand here among fragrant gardens and feel the warm western breeze on his face, not when steadfast Lluwynn and Boroda the Strong and gay young Kormak his comrade were ashen corpses with the women of Killorn keening over them. *O Killorn, Killorn, and the lake of sunset, have their ghosts gone home to you? Greet Morna for me, Kormak, whisper in the wind that I love her, tell her not to grieve.*

HE GREW aware that someone else was approaching, and turned with annoyance. But his mood lightened when he saw that it was Sathi. She was very fair as she walked toward him, young and lithe and beautiful, with the dark unbound hair floating about her.

"Are you up, Kery?" she asked, sitting down on the parapet beside him.

"Of course, my lady, or else you are dreaming," he smiled with a tired humor.

"Stupid question wasn't it?" She smiled back with a curving of closed lips that was lovely to behold. "But I am not feeling very bright just now."

"None of us are, my lady."

"Oh, forget that sort of address, Kery. I am too lonely as it is, sitting on a throne above all the world. Call me by my name, at least."

"You are very kind—Sathi."

"That is better." She smiled again, wistfully. "How you fought today! How you reaped them! What sort of a warrior are you, Kery, to ride wild bulls as if they were hests?"

"We of clan Broina have tricks. We feel things that other men do not seem to." Kery sat down beside her feeling the frozenness within him ease a little. "Aye, it can be lonely to wield power and you wonder if you are fit for it, not so? My father died in our first battle with the Ganasthi, and now I am the Broina, but who

am I to lead my clan? I cannot even perform the first duty of my post."

"And what is that?" she asked.

He told her about the god-pipe. He showed it to her and gave her the tales of its singing. "You feel your flesh shiver and your bones begin to crumble, rocks dance and mountains groan and the gates of hell open before you but now the pipes are forever silent, Sathi. No man knows how to play them."

"I heard of your music at that battle," she nodded gravely, "and wondered why it was not sounded again this time." Awe and fear were in her eyes, the hand that touched the scarred sack trembled a little. "And this is the pipe of Killorn! You cannot play it again? You cannot find out how? It would be the saving of Ryvan and of your own folk and perhaps of all the Twilight Lands, Kery."

"I know. But what can I do? Who can understand the powers of heaven or unlock the doors of hell save Llugin Longsword himself?"

"I do not know. But Kery—I wonder. This pipe . . . Do you really think that gods and not men wrought it?"

"Who but a god could make such a thing, Sathi?"

"I do not know, I say. And yet— Tell me, have you any idea of what the world is like in Killorn? Do you think it a flat plain with the sun hanging above, forever fixed in one spot?"

"Why I suppose so. Though we have met men in the southlands who claimed the world was a round ball and went about the sun in such a manner as always to turn the same face to it."

"Yes, the wise men of Ryvan tell us that that must be the case. They have learned it by studying the fixed stars and those which wander. Those others are worlds like our own, they say, and the fixed stars are suns a very long ways off. And we have a very dim legend of a time once, long and long ago, when this world did not eternally face the sun either. It spun like a top so that each side of it had light and dark alternately."

Kery knitted his brows trying to see that for himself. At last he nodded. "Well, it may have been. What of it?"

"The barbarians all think the world was born in flame and thunder many ages ago. But some of our thinkers believe that this creation was a catastrophe which destroyed that older world I speak of. There are dim legends and here and there we find very ancient ruins, cities greater than any we know today but buried and broken so long ago that even their building stones are almost weathered away. These thinkers believe that man grew mighty on this forgotten world which spun about itself, that his powers were like those we today call divine."

"Then something happened. We cannot imagine what, though a wise man once told me he believed all things attract each other—that is the reason why they fall to the ground he said—and that another world swept so close to ours that its pull stopped the spinning and yanked the moon closer than it had been."

Kery clenched his fists. "It could be," he murmured. "It could well be. For what happens to an unskillful rider when his hest stops all at once? He goes flying over its head, right? Even so, this braking of the world would have brought earthquakes greater than we can imagine, quakes that levelled everything!"

"You have a quick wit. That is what this man told me. At any rate, only a very few people and animals lived and nothing remained of their great works save legends. In the course of many ages, man and beasts alike changed, the beasts more than man who can make his own surroundings to suit. Life spread from the Day Lands through the Twilight Zone. Plants got so they could use what little light we have here. Finally even the Dark Lands were invaded by the pallid growths which can live there. Animals followed and man came after the animals until today things are as you see."

She turned wide and serious eyes on him. "Could not this pipe have been made in the early days by a man who knew some few of the ancient secrets? No god but a man even as you, Kery. And what one man can make another can understand!"

HOPE rose in him and sagged again. "How?" he asked dully. And then, seeing the tears glimmer in her eyes: "Oh, it

may all be true. I will try my best. But I do not even know where to begin."

"Try," she whispered. "Try!"

"But do not tell anyone that the pipe is silent, Sathi. Perhaps I should not even have told you."

"Why not? I am your friend and the friend of your folk. I would we had all the tribes of Killorn here."

"Jonan is not," he said grimly.

"Jonan—he is a harsh man, yes. But . . ."

"He does not like us. I do not know why but he doesn't."

"He is a strange one," she admitted. "He is not even of Ryvanian birth, he is from Guria, a city which we conquered long ago, though of course its people have long been full citizens of the empire. He wants to marry me, did you know?" She smiled. "I could not help laughing for he is so stiff. One would as soon wed an iron cuirass."

"Aye—wed—" Kery fell silent, and there was a dream in his gaze as he looked over the hills.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked after a while.

"Oh—home," he said. "I was wondering if I would ever see Killorn again."

She leaned over closer to him. One long black lock brushed his hand and he caught the faint fragrance of her. "Is it so fair a land?" she asked softly.

"No," he said. "It is harsh and gray and lonely. Storm winds sweep in and the sea roars on rocky beaches and men grow gnarled with wrestling life from the stubborn soil. But there is space and sky and freedom, there are the little huts and the great halls, the chase and the games and the old songs around leaping fires, and—well—" His voice trailed off.

"You left a woman behind, didn't you?" she murmured gently.

He nodded. "Morna of Dagb, she of the sun-bright tresses and the fair young form and the laughter that was like rain showering on thirsty ground. We were very much in love."

"But she did not come too?"

"No. So many wanted to come that the unwed had to draw lots and she lost. Nor could I stay behind for I was heir to the Broina and the god-pipes would be mine someday." He laughed, a harsh sound like

breaking iron. "You see how much good that has done me!"

"But even so—you could have married her before leaving?"

"No. Such hasty marriage is against clan law and Morna would not break it." Kery shrugged. "So we wandered out of the land, and I have not seen her since. But she will wait for me and I for her. We'll wait till—till—" He had half raised his hand but as he saw again the camp of the besiegers it fell helplessly to his lap.

"And you would not stay?" Sathi's tones were so low he had to bend his head close to hear. "Even if somehow Ryvan threw back its foes and valiant men were badly needed and could rise to the highest honors of the empire, you would not stay here?"

For a moment Kery sat motionless, wrapping himself about his innermost being. He had some knowledge of women. There had been enough of them along the dusty way, brief encounters and a fading memory.

His soul had room only for the bright image of one unforgotten girl. It was plain enough what this woman, who was young and beautiful and a queen, was saying and he would not ordinarily have hung back.

Especially when the folk of Killorn were still strangers in a camp of allies who did not trust them very far, when Killorn needed every friend it could find. And the Broina were an elvish clan who had never let overly many scruples hold them.

Only—only he liked Sathi as a human being. She was brave and generous and wise and she was, really, so pitifully young. She had had so little chance to learn the hard truths of living in the loneliness of the imperium and only a scoundrel would hurt her.

She sighed, ever so faintly, and moved back a little. Kery thought he saw her stiffening. One does not reject the offer of a queen.

"Sathi," he said, "for you, perhaps, even a man of Killorn might forget his home."

She half turned to him, hesitating, unsure of herself and him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Kery, Kery, Kery—" she whispered, and her lips stole back toward his.

He felt rather than heard a footfall and

turned with the animal alertness of the barbarian. Jonan stood watching them.

"Pardon me," said the general harshly. His countenance was strained. Then suddenly, "Your majesty! This savage mauling you . . ."

Sathi lifted a proud dark head. "This is the prince consort of Imperial Ryvan," she said haughtily. "Conduct yourself accordingly. You may go."

Jonan snarled and lifted an arm. Kery saw the armed men step from behind the tall flowering hedges and his sword came out with a rasp of steel.

"Guards!" screamed Sathi.

The men closed in. Kery's blade whistled against one shield. Another came from each side. Pikes shafts thudded against his bare head—

He fell, toppling into a roaring darkness while they clubbed him again. Down and down and down, whirling into a chasm of night. Dimly, just before blankness came, he saw the white beard and the mask-like face of the prince from Ganasth.

VI

IT WAS a long and hard ride before they stopped and Kery almost fell from the heat to which they had bound him.

"I should have thought that you would soon awake," said the man from Ganasth. He had a soft voice and spoke Aluardian well enough. "I am sorry. It is no way to treat a man, carrying him like a sack of meal. Here . . ." He poured a glass of wine and handed it to the barbarian. "From now on you shall ride erect."

Kery gulped thirstily and felt a measure of strength flowing back. He looked around him.

They had gone steadily eastward and were now camped near a ruined farmhouse. A fire was crackling and one of the score or so of enemy warriors was roasting a haunch of meat over it. The rest stood leaning on their weapons and their cold amber eyes never left the two prisoners.

Sathi stood near bleak-faced Jonan and her great dark eyes never left Kery. He smiled at her shakily and with a little sob she took a step toward him. Jonan pulled her back roughly.

"Kery," she whispered. "Kery, are you well?"

"As well as could be expected," he said wryly. Then to the Ganasthian prince, "What is this, anyway? I woke up to find myself joggling eastward and that is all I know. What is your purpose?"

"We have several," answered the alien. He sat down near the fire pulling his cloak around him against the chill that blew out of the glooming east. His impassive face watched the dance of flames as if they told him something.

Kery sat down as well, stretching his long legs easily. He might as well relax he thought. They had taken his sword and his pipes and they were watching him like hungry beasts. There was never a chance to fight.

"Come, Sathi," he waved to the girl. "Come over here by me."

"No!" snapped Jonan.

"Yes, if she wants to," said the Ganasthian mildly.

"By that filthy barbarian . . ."

"None of us have washed recently." The gentle tones were suddenly like steel. "Do not forget, General, that I am Mongku of Ganasth and heir apparent to the throne."

"And I rescued you from the city," snapped the man. "If it weren't for me you might well be dead at the hands of that red savage."

"That will do," said Mongku. "Come over here and sit by us, Sathi."

His guardsmen stirred, unacquainted with the Ryvanian tongue but sensing the clash of wills. Jonan shrugged sullenly and stalked over to sit opposite them. Sathi fled to Kery and huddled against him. He comforted her awkwardly. Over her shoulder he directed a questioning look at Mongku.

"I suppose you deserve some explanation," said the Dark Lander. "Certainly Sathi must know the facts." He leaned back on one elbow and began to speak in an almost dreamy tone.

"When Ryvan conquered Guria, many generations ago, some of its leaders were proscribed. They fled eastward and so eventually wandered into the Dark Lands and came to Ganasth. It was then merely a barbarian town but the Gurians became advisors to the king and began teaching the people

all the arts of civilization. It was their hope one day to lead the hosts of Ganasth against Ryvan, partly for revenge and partly for the wealth and easier living to be found in the Twilight Lands. Life is hard and bitter in the eternal night, Sathi. It is ever a struggle merely to keep alive. Can you wonder so very much that we are spilling into your gentler climate and your richer soil?

"Descendants of the Gurians have remained aristocrats in Ganasth. But Jonan's father conceived the idea of moving back with a few of his friends to work from within against the day of conquest. At that time we were bringing our neighbors under our heel and looked already to the time when we should move against the Twilight Lands. At any rate he did this and nobody suspected that he was aught but a newcomer from another part of Ryvan's empire. His son, Jonan, entered the army and, being shrewd and strong and able, finally reached the high post which you yourself bestowed on him, Sathi."

"Oh, no—Jonan—" She shuddered against Kery.

"Naturally when we invaded at last he had to fight against us, and for fear of prisoners revealing his purpose very few Ganasthians know who he really is. A risk was involved, yes. But it is convenient to have a general of the enemy on your side! Jonan is one of the major reasons for our success.

"Now we come to myself, a story which is very simply told. I was captured and it was Jonan's duty as a citizen of Ganasth to rescue his prince—quite apart from the fact that I do know his identity and torture might have loosened my tongue. He might have effected my escape easily enough without attracting notice, but other factors intervened. For one thing, there was this barbarian alliance, and especially that very dangerous new weapon they had which he had observed in use. We clearly could not risk its being turned on us. Indeed we almost had to capture it. Then, too, Jonan is desirous of marrying you, Sathi, and I must say that it seems a good idea. With you as a hostage Ryvan will be more amenable. Later you can return as nominal ruler of your city, a vassal of Ganasth, and that will make our conquest easier to administer. Though not too easy, I fear. The Twilight Landers will

not much like being transported into the Dark Lands to make room for us."

Sathi began to cry, softly and hopelessly. Kery stroked her hair and said nothing.

Mongku sat up and reached for the chunk of meat his soldier handed him. "So Jonan and his few trusty men let me out of prison and we went up to the palace roof after you, who had been seen going that way shortly before. Listening a little while to your conversation we saw that we had had the good luck to get that hell-pipe of the north, too. So we took you, Jonan was for killing you, Kery my friend, but I pointed out that you could be useful in many ways such as a means for making Sathi listen to reason. Threats against you will move her more than against herself, I think."

"You crawling louse," said Kery tonelessly.

Mongku shrugged. "I'm not such a bad sort but war is war and I have seen the folk of Ganasth hungering too long to have much sympathy for a bunch of fat Twilight Landers.

"At any rate, we slipped out of the city unobserved. Jonan could not remain for when the queen and I were both missing, and he responsible for both, it would be plain to many whom to accuse. Moreover, Sathi's future husband is too valuable to lose in a fight. And I myself would like to report to my father the king as to how well the war has gone.

"So we are bound for Ganasth."

There was a long silence while the fire leaped and crackled and the stars blinked far overhead. Finally Sathi shook herself and sat erect and said in a small hard voice, "Jonan, I swear you will die if you wed me. I promise you that."

The officer did not reply. He sat brooding into the dusk with a look of frozen contempt and weariness on his face.

Sathi huddled back against Kery's side and soon she slept.

ON AND on.

They were out of the Twilight Lands altogether now. Night had fallen on them and still they rode eastward. They were tough, these Ganasthi, they stopped only for sleep and quickly gulped food and a

change of mounts and the miles reeled away behind them.

Little was said on the trail. They were too tired at the halts and seemingly in too much of a hurry while riding. With Sathi there could only be a brief exchange of looks, a squeeze of hands, and a few whispered words with the glowing-eyed men of Ganasth looking on. She was a gallant girl, thought Kery. The cruel trek told heavily on her but she rode without complaint—she was still queen of Ryvan!

Ryvan, Ryvan, how long could it hold out now in the despair of its loss? Kery thought that Red Bram might be able to seize the mastery and whip the city into fighting pitch but warfare by starvation was not to the barbarians' stomachs. They could not endure a long siege.

But what lay ahead for him and her and the captured weapon of the gods?

Never had he been in so grim a country. It was dark, eternally dark, night and cold and the brilliant frosty stars lay over the land, shadows and snow and a whining wind that ate and ate and gnawed its way through furs and flesh down to the bone. The moon got fuller here than it ever did over the Twilight Belt, its chill white radiance spilled on reaching snowfields and glittered like a million pinpoint stars fallen frozen to earth.

He saw icy plains and tumbled black chasms and fanged crags sheathed in glaciers. The ground rang with cold. Cramped and shuddering in his sleeping bag, he heard the thunder of frost-split rocks, the sullen boom and rumble of avalanches, now and again the faint far despairing howl of prowling wild beasts of prey.

"How can anyone live here?" he asked Mongku once. "The land is dead. It froze to death ten thousand years ago."

"It is a little warmer in the region of Ganasth," said the prince. "Volcanoes and hot springs. And there is a great sea which has never frozen over. It has fish, and animals that live off them, and men that live off the animals. But in truth only the broken and hunted of man can ever have come here. We are the disinherited and we are claiming no more than our rightful share of life in returning to the Twilight Lands."

He added thoughtfully: "I have been

looking at that weapon of yours, Kery. I think I know the principle of its working. Sound does many strange things and there are even sounds too low or too high for the human ear to catch. A singer who holds the right note long enough can make a wine glass vibrate in sympathy until it shatters. We built a bridge once, over Thunder Gorge near Ganasth, but the wind blowing between the rock walls seemed to make it shake in a certain rhythm that finally broke it. Oh, yes, if the proper sympathetic notes can be found much may be done.

"I don't know what hell's music that pipe is supposed to sound. But I found that the reeds can be tautened or loosened and that the shape of the bag can be subtly altered by holding it in the right way. Find the proper combination and I can well believe that even the small noise made with one man's breath can kill and break and crumble."

He nodded his gaunt half-human face in the ruddy blaze of fire. "Aye, I'll find the notes, Kery, and then the pipe will play for Ganasth."

The barbarian shuddered with more than the cold, searching wind. Gods, gods, if he did—if the pipes should sound the final dirge of Killorn!

FOR a moment he had a wild desire to fling himself on Mongku, rip out the prince's throat and kill the score of enemy soldiers with his hands. But no—no—it wouldn't do. He would die before he had well started and Sathi would be alone in the Dark Lands.

He looked at her, sitting very quiet near the fire. The wavering light seemed to wash her fair young form in blood. She gave him a tired and hopeless smile.

Brave girl, brave girl, wife for a warrior in all truth. But there was the pipe and there was Killorn and there was Morna waiting for him to come home.

They were nearing Ganasth, he knew. They had ridden past springs that seethed and bubbled in the snow, seen the red glare of volcanos on the jagged horizon, passed fields of white fungus-growths which the Dark Landers cultivated. Soon the iron gates would clash shut on him and what hope would there be then?

He lay back in his sleeping bag trying to think. He had to escape. Somehow he must escape with the pipe of the gods. But if he tried and went down with a dozen spears in him there was an end of all hope.

The wind blew, drifting snow across the sleepers. Two men stood guard and their strangely glowing eyes never left the captives. They could see in this realm of shadows where he was half blind. They could hunt him down like an animal.

What to do? What to do?

On the road he went with his hands tied behind him, his ankles lashed to the stirrups, and his hest's bridle tied to the pom-pom of another man's saddle. No chance of escape there. But one must get up after sleep.

He rolled close to Sathi's quiet form as if he were merely turning over in slumber. His lips brushed against the leather bag and he wished it were her face.

"Sathi," he whispered as quietly as he could. "Sathi, don't move, but listen to me."

"Aye," her voice drifted back under the wind and the cold. "Aye, darling."

"I am going to make a break for it when we get up. Help me if you can but don't risk getting hurt. I don't think we can both get away but wait for me in Ganasth!"

She lay silent for a long while. Then, "As you will, Kery. And whatever comes, I love you."

He should have replied but the words stuck in his throat. He rolled back and, quite simply, went to sleep.

A spear butt prodding his side awoke him. He yawned mightily and sat up, loosening his bag around him, tensing every muscle in his body.

"The end of this ride will see us in the city," Mongku said.

Kery rose slowly, gauging distances. A guardsman stood beside him, spear loose in one hand. The rest were scattered around the camp or huddled close to the fire. The hests were a darker shadow bunched on the fringes.

Kery wrenched the spear of the nearest man loose, swinging one booted foot into his belly. He brought the weapon around in a smashing arc, cracking the heavy butt into another's jaw and rammed the head into the

throat of a third. Even as he stabbed he was plunging into motion.

A Ganasthian yelled and thrust at him. Sathi threw herself on the shaft, pulling it down. Kery leaped for the hests.

There were two men on guard there. One drew a sword and hewed at the northerner. The keen blade slashed through heavy tunic and undergarments, cutting his shoulder—but not too badly. He came under the fellow's guard and smashed a fist into his jaw. Seizing the weapon he whirled and hacked at the other Dark Lander beating down the soldier's ax and cutting him across the face.

The rest of the camp was charging at him. Kery bent and cut the hobbles of the hest beside him. A shower of flung spears rained about him as he sprang to the saddleless back. Twisting his left hand into the long mane he kicked the frightened beast in the flanks and plunged free.

Two Ganasthi quartered across his trail. He bent low over the hest's back, spurring the mount with the point of his sword. As he rode down on them he hewed at one and saw him fall with a scream. The other stumbled out of the path of his reckless charge.

"Hai-ah!" shouted Kery.

He clattered away over the stony icy fields toward the shelter of the dark hills looming to the north. Spears and arrows whistled on his trail and he heard, dimly, the shouts of men and the thud of pursuing hoofs.

He was alone in a land of foes, a land of freezing cold where he could scarce see half a mile before him, a land of hunger and swords. They were after him and it would take all the hunter's skill he had learned in Killorn and all the warrior's craftiness taught by the march to evade them. And after that—Ganasth!

VII

THE city loomed dark before him reaching with stony fingers for the ever-glittering stars. Of black stone it was, mountainous walls ringing in the narrow streets and the high gaunt houses. A city of night, city of darkness. Kery shivered.

Behind the city rose a mountain, a deeper shadow against the frosty dark of heaven. It was a volcano and from its mouth a red

flame flapped in the keening wind. Sparks and smoke streamed over Ganasth. There was a hot smell of sulphur in the bitter air. The fire added a faint blood-like tinge to the cold glitter of moonlight and starlight on the snowfields.

There was a highway leading through the great main gates and the glowing-eyed people of the Dark Lands were trafficking along it. Kery strode directly on his way, through the crowds and ever closer to the city.

He wore the ordinary fur and leather dress of the country that he had stolen from an outlying house. The parka hood was drawn low to shadow his alien features. He went armed, as most men did, sword belted to his waist, and because he went quietly and steadily nobody paid any attention to him.

But if he were discovered and the hue and cry went up that would be the end of his quest.

A dozen sleeps of running and hiding in the wild hills, shivering with cold and hunger, hunting animals which could see where he was blind, and ever the men of Ganasth on his trail—it would all go for naught. He would die and Sathi would be bound to a hateful pledge and Killorn would in time be the home of strangers.

He must finally have shaken off pursuit, he thought. Ranging through the hills he had found no sign of the warriors who had scoured them before. So he had proceeded toward the city on his wild and hopeless mission.

To find a woman and a weapon in the innermost citadel of a foe whose language even was unknown to him—truly the gods must be laughing!

He was close to the gates now. They loomed over him like giants, and the passage through the city wall was a tunnel. Soldiers stood on guard and Kery lowered his head.

Traffic streamed through. No one gave him any heed. But it was black as hell in the tunnel and only a Ganasthian could find his way. Blindly Kery walked ahead, bumping into people, praying that none of the angry glances he got would unmask his pretense.

When he came out into the street the breath was sobbing in his lungs. He pushed

on down its shadowy length feeling the wind that howled between the buildings cold on his cheeks.

But where to go now, where to go?

Blindly he struck out toward the heart of town. Most rulers preferred to live at the center.

The Ganasthi were a silent folk. Men stole past in the gloom, noiseless save for the thin snow scrunching under their feet. Crowds eddied dumbly through the great market squares, buying and selling with a gesture or a whispered syllable. City of half-seen ghosts . . . Kery felt more than half a ghost himself, shade of a madman flitting hopelessly to the citadel of the king of hell.

He found the place at last, more by blind blundering through the narrow twisting streets than anything else. Drawing himself into the shadow of a building across the way he stood looking at it, weighing his chances.

There was a high wall around the palace. He could only see its roof but it seemed to be set well back. He spied a gate not too far off, apparently a secondary entrance for it was small and only one sentry guarded it.

Now! By all the gods, now!

For a moment his courage failed him, and he stood sweating and shivering and licking dry lips. It wasn't fear of death. He had lived too long with the dark gods as comrade—he had but little hope of escaping alive from these nighted hills. But he thought of the task before him, and the immensity of it and the ruin that lay in his failure, and his heartbeat nearly broke through his ribs.

What, after all, could he hope to do? What was his plan, anyway? He had come to Ganasth on a wild and hopeless journey, scarcely thinking one step ahead of his death-dogged passage. Only now—now he must reach a decision, and he couldn't.

With a snarl, Kery started across the street.

NO ONE else was in sight, there was little traffic in this part of town, but at any moment someone might round either of the corners about which the way twisted and see what he was doing. He had to be fast.

He walked up to the sentry who gave him a haughty glance. There was little suspicion

in it for what had anyone to fear in the hearth of Ganasth the mighty?

Kery drew his sword and lunged.

The sentry yelled and brought down his pike. Kery batted the shaft aside even as he went by it. His sword flashed, stabbing for the other man's throat. With a dreadful gurgling the guard stumbled and went clattering to earth.

Now quickly!

Kery took the man's helmet and put it on. His own long locks were fair enough to pass for Ganasthian at a casual glance, and the visor would hide his eyes. Shedding his parka he slipped on the blood-stained tunic and the cloak over that. Taking the pike in hand he went through the gate.

Someone cried out and feet clattered in the street and along the garden paths before him. The noise had been heard. Kery looked wildly around at the pale bushes of fungus that grew here under the moon. He crawled between the fleshy fronds of the nearest big one and crouched behind it.

Guardsmen ran down the path. The moonlight blinked like cold silver on their spearheads. Kery wriggled on his stomach through the garden of fungus, away from the trail but toward the black palace.

Lying under a growth at the edge of a frost-silvered expanse of open ground he scouted the place he must next attack. The building was long and rambling, seemingly four stories high, built of polished black marble. There were two guards in sight, standing warily near a door. The rest must have run off to investigate the alarm.

Two—

Kery rose, catching his stride even as he did, and dashed from the garden toward them. The familiar helmet and tunic might assure them for the instant he needed but he had to run lest they notice.

"*Vashtung!*" shouted one of the men.

His meaning was plain enough. Kery launched his pike at the other who still looked a bit uncertain. It was an awkward throwing weapon. It brought him down wounded in a clatter of metal. The other roared and stepped forth to meet the assault.

Kery's sword was out and whirring. He chopped at the pikeshaft that jabbed at

him, caught his blade in the tough wood and pushed the weapon aside. As he came up face to face he kneeed the Ganasthian with savage precision.

The other man reached up and grabbed his ankle and pulled him down. Kery snarled, the rage of battle rising in him. It was as if the pipes of Broina skirled in his head. Fear and indecision were gone. He got his hands on the soldier's neck and wrenched. Even as the spine snapped he was rising again to his feet.

He picked up sword and pike and ran up the stairs and through the door. Now—Sathi! He had one ally in this house of hell.

A long and silent corridor, lit by dim red cressets, stretched before him. He raced down it and his boots woke hollow echoes that paced him through its black length.

Two men in the dress of servants stood in the room into which he burst. They stared wildly at him. He stabbed one but the other fled screaming. He'd give the alarm but there was no time to chase. No time!

A staircase wound up toward the second story and Kery took it, flying up three steps at a time. Dimly, below him, he heard the frantic tattoo of a giant gong, the alarm signal, but the demon fury was fire and ice in his blood.

Another servant gaped at him. Kery seized him with a rough hand and held the sword at his throat.

"Sathi," he snarled. "Sathi—Ryvan—Sathi!"

The Ganasthian gibbered in a panic that seemed weird with his frozen face. Kery grinned viciously and pinked him with the blade. "Sathi!" he said urgently. "Sathi of Ryvan!"

Shaking, the servant led the way, Kery urging him ungently to greater speed. They went up another flight of stairs and down a hallway richly hung with furs and tapestries. Passing lackeys gaped at them and some ran. Gods, they'd bring all Ganasth down on his neck!

Before a closed door stood a guardsmen. Kery slugged the servant when he pointed at that entrance and ran to meet this next barrier. The guard yelled and threw up his pike.

Kery's own long-shafted weapon clashed forth. They stabbed at each other, seeking

the vitals. The guardsman had a cuirass and Kery's point grazed off the metal. He took a ripping slash in his left arm. The Ganasthian bored in, wielding his pike with skill, beating aside Kery's guard.

VIII

THE Twilight Lander dropped his own weapon, seized the other haft in both hands, and wrenched. Grimly the Ganasthian hung on. Kery worked his way in closer. Suddenly he released the shaft, almost fell against his enemy, and drew the Dark Lander's sword. The short blade flashed and the sentry fell.

The door was barred. He beat on it frantically, hearing the clatter of feet coming up the stairs, knowing that a thunderstorm of hurled weapons was on its way. "Sathi!" he cried. "Sathi, it is Kery, let me in!"

The first soldiers appeared down at the end of the corridor. Kery threw himself against the door. It opened, and he plunged through and slammed down the bolt.

Sathi stood there and wonder was in her eyes. "Oh, Kery," she breathed, "Kery, you came . . ."

"No time," he rasped. "Where is the pipe of Killorn?"

She fought for calmness. "Mongku has it," she said. "His chambers are on the next floor, above these—"

The door banged and groaned as men threw their weight against it.

Sathi took his hand and led him into the next room. A fire burned low in the hearth. "I thought it out, against the time you might come," she said. "The only way out is up that chimney. It should take us to the roof and thence we can go down again."

"Oh, well done, lass!" With a sweep of the poker Kery scattered the logs and coals out on the carpet while Sathi barred the door into the next room. Drawing a deep breath the Killorn went into the fireplace, braced feet and back against the sides of the flue and began to climb up.

Smoke swirled in the chimney. He gasped for breath and his lungs seemed on fire. Night in here, utter dark and choking of fouled air. His heart roared and his strength ebbed from him. Up and up and up, hitch yourself still further up.

"Kery." Her voice came low, broken with coughing. "Kery—I can't. I'm slipping—"

"Hang on!" he gasped. "Here. Reach up. My belt—"

He felt the dragging weight catch at him, there in the smoke-thickened dark, and drew a grim breath and edged himself further, up and up and up.

And out!

He crawled from the chimney and fell to the roof with the world reeling about him and a rushing of darkness in his head. His tormented lungs sucked the bitter air. He sobbed and the tears washed the soot from his eyes. He stood up and helped Sathi to her feet.

She leaned against him, shuddering with strain and with the wind that cried up here under the flickering stars. He looked about, seeking a way down again. Yes, over there, a doorway opening on a small terrace. Quickly now.

They crawled over the slanting, ice-slippery roof, helping each other where they could, fighting a way to the battlement until Kery's grasping fingers closed on its edge and he heaved both of them up onto it.

"Come on!" he snapped. "They'll be behind us any moment now."

"What to do?" she murmured. "What to do?"

"Get the pipes!" he growled, and the demon blood of Broina began to boil in him again. "Get the pipes and destroy them if we can do nothing else."

They went through the door and down a narrow staircase and came to the fourth floor of the palace.

Sathi looked up and down the long empty hallway. "I have been up here before," she said with a coolness that was good to hear. "Let me see—yes, this way, I think—" As they trotted down the hollow length of corridor she said further: "They treated me fairly well here, indeed with honor though I was a prisoner. But oh, Kery, it was like sunlight to see you again!"

He stooped and kissed her, briefly, wondering if he would ever have a chance to do it properly. Most likely not but she would be a good companion on hell-road.

They came into a great antechamber. Kery had his sword out, the only weapon

left to him, but no one was in sight. All the royal guards must be out hunting him. He grinned wolfishly and stepped to the farther door.

"Kery—" Sathi huddled close against him. "Kery, do we dare? It may be death—"

"It will be like that anyway," he said curtly and swung the door open.

A GREAT, richly furnished suite of chambers, dark and still, lay before him. He padded through the first, looking right and left like a questing animal, and into the next.

Two men stood there, talking—Jonan and Mongku.

They saw him and froze for he was a terrible sight, bloody, black with smoke, fury cold and bitter-blue in his eyes. He grinned, a white flash of teeth in his sooted face, and drew his sword and stalked forward.

"So you have come," said Mongku quietly.

"Aye," said Kery. "Where is the pipe of Killorn?"

Jonan thrust forward, drawing the sword at his belt. "I will hold him, prince," he said. "I will carve him into very bits for you."

Kery met his advance in a clash of steel. They circled, stiff-legged and wary, looking for an opening. There was death here. Sathi knew starkly that only one of those two would leave this room.

Jonan lunged in, stabbing, and Kery skipped back. The officer was better in handling these shortwords than he who was used to the longer blades of the north. He brought his own weapon down sharply, deflecting the thrust. Jonan parried, and then it was bang and crash, thrust and leap and hack with steel clamoring and sparking. The glaives hissed and screamed, the fighters breathed hoarsely and there was murder in their eyes.

Jonan ripped off his cloak with his free hand and flapped it in Kery's face. The northerner hacked out, blinded, and Jonan whipped the cloth around to tangle his blade. Then he rushed in, stabbing. Kery fell to one knee and took the thrust on his helmet, letting it glide off. Reaching up he

got Jonan around the waist and pulled the man down on him.

They rolled over, growling and biting and gouging. Jonan clung to his sword and Kery to that wrist. They crashed into a wall and struggled there.

Kery got one leg around Jonan's waist and pulled himself up on the man's chest. He got a two-handed grasp on the enemy's sword arm, slipped the crook of one elbow around, and broke the bone.

Jonan screamed. Kery reached over. He took the sword from his loosening fingers and buried it in Jonan's breast.

He stood up then, trembling with fury, and looked at the pipes of Killorn.

It was almost as if Mongku's expressionless face smiled. The Ganasthian held the weapon cradled in his arms, the mouthpiece near his lips. He nodded. "I got it to working," he said. "In truth it is a terrible thing. Who holds it might well hold the world someday."

Kery stood waiting, the sword hanging limp in one hand.

"Yes," said Mongku. "I am going to play it."

Kery started across the floor—and Mongku blew.

THE sound roared forth, wild, cruel, seizing him and shaking him, ripping at nerve and sinew. Bone danced in his skull and night shouted in his brain. He fell to the ground, feeling the horrible jerking of his muscles, seeing the world swim and blur before him.

The pipes screamed. Goodnight, Kery, goodnight, goodnight! It is the dirge of the world he is playing, the coronach of Killorn, it is the end of all things skirling in your body—

Sathi crept forth. She was behind the player, the hell-tune did not strike her so deeply, but even as his senses blurred toward death Kery saw how she fought for every step, how the bronze lamp almost fell from her hand. Mongku had forgotten her. He was playing doom, watching Kery die and noting how the music worked.

Sathi struck him from behind. He fell, dropping the pipes, and turned dazed eyes up to her. She struck him again and again.

Then she fled over to Kery and cradled

his head in her arms and sobbed with the horror of it and with the need for haste. "Oh, quickly, quickly, beloved, we have to flee, they will be here now—I hear them in the hallway, come—"

Kery sat up. His head was ringing and thumping, his muscles burned and weakness was like an iron hand on him. But there was that which had to be done and it gave him strength from some forgotten wellspring. He rose on shaky legs and went over and picked up the bagpipe of the gods.

"No," he said.

"Kery . . ."

"We will not flee," he said. "I have a song to play."

She saw the cold remote mask of his face. He was not Kery now of the ready laugh and the reckless bravery and the wistful memories of a lost homestead. He had become something else with the pipe in his hands, something which stood stern and somber and apart from man. There seemed to be ghosts in the vast shadowy room, the blood of his fathers who had been Pipers of Killorn, and he was the guardian now. She shrank against him for protection. There was a small charmed circle which the music did not enter but it was a stranger she stood beside.

Carefully Kery lifted the mouthpiece to his lips and blew. He felt the vibration tremble under his feet. The walls wavered before his eyes as unheard notes shivered the air. He himself heard no more than the barbarian screaming of the war-music he had always known but he saw death riding out.

A troop of guardsmen burst through the door—halted, stared at the tall piper, and then howled in terror and panic.

Kery played. And as he played Killorn rose before him. He saw the reach of gray windswept moors, light glimmering on high cold tarns, birds winging in a sky of riven clouds. Space and loneliness and freedom, a hard open land of stern and bitter beauty, the rocks which had shaped his bones and the soil which had nourished his flesh. He stood by the great lake of sunset, storms swept in over it, rain and lightning, the waves dashed themselves to angry death on a beach of grinding stones.

He strode forward, playing, and the sol-

diers of Ganasth died before him. The walls of the palace trembled, hangings fell to the shuddering floor, the building groaned as the demon music sought and found resonance.

He played them a song of the chase, the long wild hunt over the heath, breath gasping in hot lungs and blood shouting in the ears, running drunk with wind after the prey that fled and soared. He played them fire and comradeship and the little huts crouched low under the mighty sky. And the walls cracked around him. Pillars trembled and broke. The roof began to cave in and everywhere they died about him.

He played war, the skirl of pipes and the shout of men, clamor of metal, tramp of feet and hoofs, and the fierce blink of light on weapons. He sang them up an army that rode over the rim of the world with swords aflame and arrows like rain and the whole building tumbled to rubble even as he walked out of it.

Tenderly, dreamily, he played of Morna the fair, Morna who had stood with him on the edge of the lake where it is forever sunset, listening to the chuckle of small wavelets and looking west to the pyre of red and gold and dusky purple, the eyes and the lips and the hair of Morna and what she and he had whispered to each other on that quiet shore. But there was death in that song.

The ground began to shake under Ganasth. There is but little strength in the lungs of one man and yet when that strikes just the right notes, and those small pushes touch off something else far down in the depths of the earth, the world will tremble. The Dark Landers rioted in a more than human fear, in the blind panic which the piper sang to them.

The gates were closed before him, but Kery played them down. Then he turned and faced the city and played it a song of the wrath of the gods. He played them up rain and cold and scouring wind, glaciers marching from the north in a blind whirl of snow, lightning aflame in the heavens and cities ground to dust. He played them a world gone crazy, sundering continents and tidal waves marching over the shores and mountains flaming into a sky of rain and fire. He played them whirlwinds and

dust storms and the relentless sleety blast from the north. He sang them ruin and death and the sun burning out to darkness.

When he ceased, and he and Sathi left the half-shattered city, none stirred to follow. None dared who were still alive. It seemed to the two of them, as they struck out over the snowy plains, that the volcano behind was beginning to grumble and throw its flames a little higher.

IX

HE STOOD alone in the gardens of Ryvan's palace looking out over the city. Perhaps he thought of the hard journey back from the Dark Lands. Perhaps he thought of the triumphant day when they had sneaked back into the fastness and then gone out again, the Piper of Killorn and Red Bram roaring in his wake to smash the siege and scatter the armies of Ganasth and send the broken remnants fleeing homeward. Perhaps he thought of the future—who knew? Sathi approached him quietly, wondering what to say.

He turned and smiled at her, the old merry smile she knew but with something else behind it. He had been the war-god of Killorn and that left its mark on a man.

"So it all turned out well," he said.

"Thanks to you, Kery," she answered softly.

"Oh, not so well at that," he decided.

"There were too many good men who fell, too much laid waste. It will take a hundred

years before all this misery is forgotten."

"But we reached what we strove for," she said. "Ryvan is safe, all the Twilight Lands are. You folk of Killorn have the land you needed. Isn't that enough to achieve?"

"I suppose so." Kery stirred restlessly. "I wonder how it stands in Killorn now?"

"And you still want to return?" She tried to hold back the tears. "This is a fair land, and you are great in it, all you people from the north. You would go back to—that?"

"Indeed," he said. "All you say is true. We would be fools to return." He scowled. "It may well be that in the time we yet have to wait most of us will find life better here and decide to stay. But not I, Sathi. I am just that kind of fool."

"This land needs you, Kery. I do."

He tilted her chin, smiling half sorrowfully into her eyes. "Best you forget, dear," he said. "I will not stay here once the chance comes to return."

She shook her head blindly, drew a deep breath, and said with a catch in her voice, "Then stay as long as you can, Kery."

"Do you really mean that?" he asked slowly.

She nodded.

"You are a fool too," he said. "But a very lovely fool."

He took her in his arms.

Presently she laughed a little and said, not without hope, "I'll have a while to change your mind, Kery. And I'll try to do it. I'll try!"

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Halftripper

By
MACK REYNOLDS

Mars was strewn with the human wrecks of halftrippers—terrorized cowards of space travel. But perhaps the saddest, and the most fearful of all was the immortal spacebum called Micheal.

THIS SECTION of New Sante Fe was off my beaten track. I've been on Mars a long time and am more than usually familiar with the various centers where we Terrans do our congregating. However, it'd been years since I'd come through here.

I was sitting in an obscure tavern, called, with commendable restraint, simply Sam's Bar, lapping up Martian brandy and facing the prospect of returning to the spaceport in a few hours with no particular enthusiasm.

I only half-noticed the old man who got up on the stool next to me. Sam came over and asked him what he'd have.

The oldest carefully counted out some coins on the bar and said, "Wine, Sam; a glass of Martian wine."

"You know I don't want your money, Joseph," Sam told him.

The old man answered reproachfully, "The wine would taste that much the less, my friend, if I had not earned it by the sweat of my . . ."

"Okay," Sam sighed. He poured the wine and rang up the money and went off to wait on someone else.

A halftripper sidled up to me. "How about a drink, spaceman?" he whined. "I'm a graduate of the academy myself, class of '72." He must have noted my United Space Lines uniform.

"Sorry," I said gruffly, keeping my back to him. Any spaceman can tell you that if you talk to a halftripper for long you'll soon be showing symptoms of space cafard yourself. The underlying terror in him; the mind shattering fear of space; the way he stares at you, thinking that you can go home, while he is afraid to risk the trip. There are few of them that can hide their disease.

"I need a shot bad," he whispered urgently. He probably did, too. Few halftrippers are able to secure jobs on the planets of their exile. Most of them become beach-combers of space. Of course, there are some

exceptions, especially if they have money and connections.

I shuddered. "Beat it," I grated, hating myself and him.

The fear of space cafard must be somewhat similar to that of seasickness every new sailor had back in ancient days when man sailed the oceans of Terra. He never knew until he made his first voyage if he was going to be susceptible; and, if he turned out to be, it meant the sea wasn't for him.

OF COURSE, space cafard goes tragically further. A new man usually succumbs his first few hours in space, if he is going to get it at all. He probably makes it to the next planet, sometimes not; sometimes he goes incurably mad, right off the bat. But even if he does make it, wild horses could never get him on another rocketship. He becomes a halftripper, marooned on an alien world. Usually, although I have known of several exceptions, if you don't get it on your first trip, it seldom bothers you; you're immune for the rest of your life.

He repeated, "How about it, spaceman?"

Sam began to approach threateningly. He couldn't afford to have halftrippers hang out in his place. For one thing, the shipping lines would soon declare him out of bounds for their crews. You just can't let good men come in contact with obvious victims of space cafard.

The old-timer Sam had called Joseph was distressed. "You know not what you say," he told me gently.

I managed a sneer. "Am I supposed to buy a drink for every spacebum that comes along?"

The halftripper's eyes lit up and he came closer to the old man. "How about it, pop? Could you loan me the price of a nip of woi?"

Joseph's face was compassionate. "I am sorry, brother, I myself have nothing, but I commend you to the generosity of the tavern keeper."

I snorted at that. I could imagine how much generosity the space leper would get from the bartender.

That's where the surprise came. Sam sighed. "Okay, halftripper, what'll it be?"

The spacebum ordered a double woji, got it down quickly, as though he was afraid Sam might change his mind, and then beat it to find a place to have his dreams when the full force of the also-narcotic drink hit him.

I finished my brandy, ordered another, and grinned wryly at the old-timer. "You give me kерт for telling him to beat it, but you give Sam the high sign to let him have woji with which to rot out his brains. I'd think I was being the kinder of the two of us."

"Each man's salvation is within himself," Joseph said softly. "You won't redeem him by attempting to keep him from his weaknesses."

"You talk like a saint but I notice you're sitting here at a bar."

He looked at me penetratingly, and there was vast emptiness behind his eyes. "There is little to enjoy in life," he said softly, "but I have had ample time to investigate all of the supposed pleasures. At one time I drank greatly and kept myself in a state of continual intoxication for a period longer than you could believe. Then I went through a state when I let nothing pass my lips but water. Now I see the mistake of both extremes and can enjoy an occasional glass without feeling the need of swilling it down until intoxication dulls me."

He had me interested now. I said, "You sound as though you've found the way in which to get the greatest satisfaction from everything in life but I notice that you don't appear particularly happy."

He was silent for a long time. Finally he sighed and answered, "Happiness is not to be found in wine, nor in food, nor in beautiful women, nor even in wealth and power. It is from within, what you have done, what you are in the eyes of your fellow man."

He looked as though he was about to say more, but he fell silent, his eyes on something far away, although he seemed to be looking directly into my face. Then a light returned to them and he came back to our conversation. "I am sorry," he said. "For a

moment you reminded me of someone I knew long and long ago. But now I must be on my way." He left his drink half-finished on the bar and walked wearily to the door.

Sam took his glass away and wiped the bar reflectively. "Whenever he's here, I can't turn down any halftrippers or other spacebums," he complained, "I tried it once, and the old boy looked so pathetic that I damn near cried myself."

"He seems to be quite a character," I said, only half-interested.

"Sure," Sam said. "Haven't you heard about Joseph? He's immortal."

"What?" I said, startled.

"IMMORTAL. You know, he lives forever." He poured me another brandy and leaned on the bar. His other customers had left and he was obviously in the mood for talking.

"I thought everybody knew about Joseph," he went on. "He was one of the first spacebarons, a real bigshot, controlled the whole of Calypso; him and his brother. They not only personally owned all of the satellite, but even all of the space lines that served it. When it came to law there, he was judge, jury, and owner of the courthouse and jail. Brother, that was one monopoly."

"You mean that old man that was just here?" I said in amazement.

"That's right. Joseph, we call him now. He probably had a longer name then. It was a long time ago.

"Anyway, to get back to the story, one day a space liner radios in that it wants to make an emergency landing on Calypso for medical assistance. They had some virulent disease on board and the passengers and crew were dying like flies.

"Well, this brother of Joseph, Micheal, or something like that his name was, advises Joseph not to give them permission to land. The captain of the liner pleads with him, but Joseph tells him to move on, he doesn't want to take any chances. The ship tried to make the next port, I forget just what it was, but, anyway, to cut it short, they all died. That's what started things churning in Joseph's bailiwick; a full-scale revolution, no less."

"You missed something there," I said. "The people wouldn't have been expected

to be so upset. After all, no matter how mistaken, he must have thought he was acting in the interests of everyone on Calypso."

"Yeah," Sam pointed out, "but the thing is that among the passengers was Joseph's own boy, the most popular person on the satellite and the apple of his old man's eye. Nobody had known it, but the kid was playing hookey from his school on Terra and was making a cruise of the Jupiter moons.

"Joseph himself had never been very popular with his people, neither had this younger brother of his, Micheal. Too strict, see. But everybody liked the boy and were looking forward to the day when he'd take over the reins of government. When it came out what happened, they went berserk. They cornered Joseph and Micheal and a dozen or so of their close associates in the palace, which was actually more of a fortress than anything else."

Sam wiped the bar again without need, and said reflectively, "It must've been quite a fight. Not that Joseph himself participated. The boy had been his whole life, and he just moved around like he was in a trance.

"They threw everything at that palace. Every weapon, every device, that had been thought up for centuries; but it didn't crack. Finally, the fight was ended by a fleet of battle cruisers from Terra. Joseph and Micheal and the rest were removed and brought here to Mars. None of them dared to remain on Calypso."

I poured myself another brandy from the bottle that Sam had left on the bar. "You make quite a story of it," I told him, "but you didn't tell me what you'd started to—about the immortality."

"Yeah," he said, "that's right. Well, it seems that in the atomic bombardment of the palace something happened that wound up with Joseph and his friends all immortal. Don't ask me what; I don't know and neither did these scientist guys when they tried to figure it out. Of course, it didn't become known for years; not until it became obvious they weren't dying, or even aging. They continued to appear as they had at the time of the fight. I don't mean they couldn't die at all; one by one they dropped away. Two were lost in space; one was blown up in an explosion on Terra; another was

burned to death; but the only way they could die was through accident—or suicide. After a few hundred years they were all gone but Joseph, and, of course, he'd gone batty."

I interrupted. "You mean he's insane?"

The bartender grinned. "Crazy as a makron."

I said slowly, "He seemed normal enough to me. Uh . . . perhaps a bit eccentric."

Sam said, "Brother, he's as far around the corner as you can get. You know what he thinks? He thinks that he's wandering through space, going from planet to planet, trying to find a situation similar to that in which he sent away the person he loved most to his death. He thinks that if he ever finds that similar situation, he'll be able to make the opposite decision from the one he made before and that will redeem him."

I FROWNED. "Where does he get the money for his wandering around the planets?"

"He don't need no money. He's good luck. There's not a captain in the system that would refuse free passage to old Joseph." Sam shrugged his beefy shoulders. "And who am I to say otherwise? That's why I give the bums free drinks when he's around; so does every other bartender."

Two customers had entered and Sam made his way down to them, leaving me alone.

A halftripper scurried through the door and cringed up to me. He whimpered, "How about a drink, spaceman? I . . ."

I flipped him a coin. "Sure, buddy," I said, repressing my usual nausea at the sight of him. I got down from my stool and made my way out. It was time for me to return to the spaceport and my job.

I suppose that I forgot to tell the cabbie to take me to the administration building entrance—the first time I'd made that mistake in years. I was preoccupied with thoughts of Joseph and the story Sam had told of him. The guards at the main gate must have let us through without question when they saw my United Space Lines uniform. At any rate, when I looked up, it was too late. Not only was I on the landing field and in full view of the concrete take-off

aprons, but one gigantic freighter was in the process of blasting off.

All the horror of it flowed over me with a rush. The careful training of years; the work of the doctors who had treated me; all my own self-discipline—were gone. I shook with terrified frenzy. The depths of space! The free fall! The black emptiness! The utter, uncontrollable terror!"

I screamed shrilly and the cabbie turned, wide-eyed, to stare at me.

He knew the symptoms. "Space cafard! A halftripper!" he gasped, and spun the cab about to get me to a hospital. He must have realized then that my uniform didn't necessarily mean that I worked on the liners themselves, but that I could be an office employee who only on rare occasions went near the ships.

He knew too, that the very sight of a spacecraft blasting off was enough to put me in bed for a week; and that I was uncommonly lucky to have the funds for the hospitalization. Mars was strewn with the human wrecks of halftrippers who hadn't.

As we whirled from the yard, we passed

the bent figure of Joseph walking unhurriedly toward a liner which was loading for the Venus run.

My heart cried out, even through my terror, my sickness:

Joseph, Joseph . . . So you too are still alive; and still seeking forgiveness. I had thought I was the last.

But you are by far the better off of we two, Joseph. For at least you have been free to wander while I have stayed on this one hated spot since all those centuries ago when we fled from Calypso and the wrath of the people who had loved the boy so. As though we hadn't loved him ourselves, Joseph.

Yes, you are the better off, you can seek throughout the stars for forgiveness. Then, too, your mind is forever dulled with your madness, while mine is horribly aware, always, of what we've been through and of the centuries ahead; it is only blurred when the space cafard comes.

Joseph, Joseph . . . you didn't even recognize your brother Micheal, nor I you, when we met.

THE HOUSE THAT STOOD STILL

By

A. E. VAN VOGT

A SCIENCE-FICTION—DETECTIVE THRILLER . . .

ONE OF VAN VOGT'S BEST—

DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE

Winter Issue

ON SALE NOV. 1st

PALIMPSEST

By ROGER DEE

*Care to sire a brand new race?
Then get aboard the Terra IV, only
spaceship to escape demolished
Earth, and enter the new-born
Venusian sweepstakes.*

*THE FIRST Venusian ship to reach
Earth found a single isolated tribe of
human beings roving the buslands of
a large island in the southern hemisphere.
The Earthmen were without exception dark*



VISTAL

of skin and eye, and their hair, which was jet-black, was as kinky as koola wool. All were backward to the point of savagery, fleeing in superstitious terror before every attempt at communication.

Val Conna and his crew—nine tall young men, fair-skinned and lordly and alike enough to have been brothers—made an exhaustive search that carefully bypassed ruined cities still radioactive past the safety point, and after ten days abandoned their quest in disappointment.

"I find no resemblance between this remnant of Earib's people and ourselves," announced Mach Bren, expedition anthropologist, "except a bipedal structure which only bears out our theory of like species developing on like worlds, and this similarity is sharply negated by impossible divergence in racial characteristics. Neither people could have changed so greatly during the four thousand years we know our culture has existed on Venus, and therefore it is obvious that we did not stem from Earibmen nor they from us."

There was no argument.

"Then the puzzle of our origin is still unsolved," said Val Conna, and gave the order to blast off. So they left Earth for home, already planning further expeditions to the outer planets in search of the world of their birth . . .

SOMEHOW Hanlon had wormed his way into their quarters and was waiting when Geddes and Lowe and Hovic, crew of the Terra IV, returned to base from their final interview with the press. Hanlon had been drunk for days, and was in pitiable condition. His hand shook violently and the bloodshot shine of his eyes was like a reflection to the fiery red of his unkempt hair.

"I had to say good-bye before the blast-off," he said, with a sorry attempt at his old assurance. "After all, I was one of you until a couple of months ago, and I . . . well, I wanted to wish you luck. I wish I were going to Venus with you."

They considered him without particular emotion, three dark, compact men in their late twenties, calm with the nerveless poise of long indoctrination and utterly sure of

themselves. Hovic, bluntest of the three, ignored Hanlon and went directly to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

"You lost your chance when you flunked training, Hanlon," Geddes said. "Just now you're a definite irritant, and we can't afford being upset, just before the flight. You'll have to go."

Hanlon avoided his eyes, looking thoroughly hangdog and disreputable. He needed a shave badly and his careless clothing had been slept in more than once.

"I could have borne the surgical operations," he said. "A man's appendix and tonsils and teeth can be dangerous in space or on another planet where he can't get medical attention—but their damned psycho-conditioning was too much. How could I know what I'd really be like when those cold-blooded Foundation specialists got through with me?"

"It takes a specially adapted kind of man to beat space," Geddes pointed out patiently. "We can't risk neurosis out there, any more than we can risk appendicitis or abscessed teeth. The Foundation learned a lot from those first three failures, Hanlon. This time it's not repeating its old errors."

Hovic came out of the bathroom, replacing his dentures. He was the heaviest of the crew, a muscular Slav with the unimaginative man's natural directness. "You're washed up, Hanlon. Why don't you get out and leave us alone?"

At the door Hanlon hesitated, his face averted. "You'll be blasting off in another six hours, leaving everything behind. You will be heroes when you come back and you'll be rich . . ."

Geddes felt his lip curling. "But right now we've no use for our spare credits, is that it? You'd like to make a last touch before we go, and if we don't come back the debt won't worry you, Hanlon."

Lowe came between them, digging out his wallet. He was a slender, sensitive sort, the only one of the three who had been really friendly with Hanlon before the Irishman's congenital wildness led to his discharge.

"Let it go, Ged. What do a few credits mean to us now?"

He emptied his wallet, dropping yellow notes into Hanlon's ready hands. After a

moment Geddes followed suit, but Hovic stood fast.

"He can stay sober for my part," Hovic growled. "Let him go back to his gambling friends and his wenches if he wants a hand-out."

Hanlon pocketed his alms and grinned at Geddes, the hangdog look melting before his old recklessness. "Keep a close eye on my pal Hovic, Ged. Ten to one he cracks up on you at null-area and finishes the trip under hypnol."

THEY forgot him the instant he was gone, turning to their last-minute packing, laying out the heavy coveralls they would wear during the flight, shaving and showering before their final nap.

In the shower, Geddes caught Lowe fingering the pale scar of his appendectomy and frowning thoughtfully. Without his dentures Lowe looked older and uncertain and somehow shrunk, and in spite of his conditioned calm Geddes felt a cold stirring of alarm.

"Forget Hanlon's carping," he said. He punched Lowe in the ribs, trying to be jocular. "Those Foundation medics know what they're about. Come on, we've got to get our beauty sleep before the jumpoff."

When they awoke three hours later and dressed for the flight they found that Hanlon had paid them a second visit and had stolen all three of their wrist chronometers, expensive instruments easily negotiable for their weight in platinum.

"Cheap at the price," said Geddes, and shrugged away the loss with conditioned equanimity. Lowe had no comment. Only Hovic grumbled.

"Those chronos will keep him in Irish whiskey for weeks," he said. "I hope the louse drinks himself to death on it."

On that note they went down to the Foundation staff car that waited to take them to the launching site—three calm, resolute young men, serenely confident and prepared for anything.

They arrived at dusk, just as the last supply drum was being hoisted into the vertical bronze spindle of the *Terra IV*. They went up the tall personnel ladder, undisturbed by the actinic lightnings of

photographers' flash-bulbs, and vanished one at a time into the belly of the ship that was finally to bridge the emptiness between Earth and Venus. They sealed the port, checked the instrument gauges and the medicine cabinet with its hypnol equipment, and strapped themselves down on jointed pneumatic acceleration couches.

A red-glowing bulb on the instrument panel turned amber and then green. Geddes pressed the firing button . . .

Weight bore them down like a giant hand. They were not disturbed. Inured to acceleration and knowing the exact instant when their discomfort must cease. They waited patiently, eyes closed, blackout fended off by past conditioning in centrifuges and endless sessions of psychological preparation.

They were free of Earth's atmosphere in a matter of minutes. At the end of an hour the chemical jets cut out and atomic propulsors took over, shoving the *Terra IV* on at a lessened acceleration that would bring her to Venus, allowing for orbital drift corrections, in exactly twenty-seven days.

Communicating with the Foundation later was in theory a simple matter of narrow-beam linkage. The *Terra I* had proved that in 1969, twenty-nine years before, when frozen fuel lines sent her drifting derelict into space. The catch was that the atomic drive with its monstrous din of interference must be shut off before the radio could operate.

It was eight days before null-area was reached, but long before that time—on the second day out, to be exact—the *Terra IV*'s first emergency struck.

Lowe, making a routine check of supply crates lashed to bulkhead eye-bolts in the hold, heard a frantic hammering that originated, not from the outside hull as his first startled fancy had it, but from inside an airtight drum stenciled "FILM."

He called Geddes and Hovic, more for moral support than for assistance, and together they ripped open the drum. Inside they found Hanlon, unconscious upon a litter of food tins and exhausted oxygen flasks.

There was also a whiskey bottle among the ruck. Hanlon, true to form, was very drunk.

THEY carried Hanlon out of the hold and strapped him into the radio chair, a position not to be used for another six days. They clamped an oxygen mask over his purpled face and fed him intravenously, and finally his impossibly resilient constitution threw off the effects of acceleration, Irish whiskey and near-asphyxiation.

He laughed in their faces when they asked why he had stowed away.

"I'm dodging the draft," he said. "There's going to be another war any day now—the last one."

Hanlon was quite sane in spite of the punishment he had taken at blastoff and later in the stifling prison of his hideout, and his prophecy shook them more than they dared admit.

"It's been coming to a head for months," he said. "They wouldn't have told you at the Foundation, because they didn't want you distracted from training, but the bombs will be dropping before we reach Venus. You'll see when you get the radio working."

They kept Hanlon strapped to the radio couch, knowing better than to trust him, giving him temporary freedom for the physical necessities only when all three were on hand to guard him. They made their astronomical readings and orbital corrections as their instructions prescribed, concealing even from each other their eagerness for the day when the atomic uproar of the propulsors could be cut and they could assure themselves via tight-beam that Hanlon was wrong.

They spoke little among themselves, but Hanlon talked incessantly, chafing against his bonds and lapsing periodically into near-delirium until his first insistent craving for alcohol wore off. Later he set himself to assess their chances of landing safely on Venus, ignoring after his headlong fashion everything that had been taught him before his discharge from the Foundation.

"The *Terra I* missed, back in 1969," he said once. "The Foundation picked up her signals clear out past Jupiter when she went derelict. They never did quite prove that the *Terra II* was lost in 1980. The boys at Palomar claimed that her fuel pile went up just outside Venus' atmosphere, but they didn't have time for a spectroanalysis. It

could have been an electrical discharge instead—there's bound to be a hell of a difference in potential between worlds, or between a space-irradiated ship and a planet as close to the sun as Venus."

They tried to ignore his arguments, resisting the thought that after all their preparation they might not be the first to set foot on the new world. Too, they could not lay claim to Venus as a Foundation possession if the *Terra II* had landed first. She had been a privately owned ship, manned, along with his family, by a reckless and fabulously rich Irish misogynist named Sean Connors.

The *Terra III*, which was built by the Foundation but manned by Army personnel, made the jump in 1991, and fell pilotless into the sun when her crew mutinied against their single officer.

And if Hanlon had guessed right, the *Terra IV* in 1998 might be the last.

They endured his theorizing until even their conditioned calm wore thin, and silenced him finally by threatening to put him under hypnol for the remainder of the trip. Hanlon lapsed into sullen silence and worked secretly at his bonds. The situation stagnated endlessly until the eight-day acceleration period was up, when they released Hanlon from his couch in order to use the radio.

In their eagerness to make contact with Earth they neglected to bind Hanlon again, which was a mistake, since he had not been conditioned as they had against the weird physiological reaction to weightlessness that followed the cutting of the drive.

To Hanlon it was like being dumped suddenly into a bottomless shaft down which he fell endlessly. His heart came into his throat, his ears roared, the instinctive fear of falling inherited from arboreal ancestors knotted his stomach with terror and drove out all reason.

"I'm falling!" he screamed, and snatched at a guide-rail. "Falling . . ."

Disoriented mechano-controls reacted wildly, refusing him balance, and he smashed into a bulkhead. Geddes and Lowe tackled him while Hovic tried to fend all three gyrating bodies from the instrument board, but Hanlon was not to be quieted. He screamed and threshed like a

maniac, his limbs jerking with spastic overcompensation to every movement.

They pinned him down finally and shot enough hypnol into him to keep him unconscious for days. They left him floating limply with his belt snapped to a bulkhead ring and turned their attention to the tight-beam communicator, coddling into intelligibility the first blurred signal that reached them from Earth.

It was as well that Hanlon was not conscious, since his prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. On Earth, war had come—and gone.

They never picked up more than that single dying signal, but before it flickered out they understood that the cataclysm had been atomic, planet-wide, and final. And when that last wavering link with Earth was gone they looked at each other palely over the dead radio and felt the impossible realization of racial extinction rising up like madness behind the psycho-blocks of their carefully-conditioned sanity.

"So Hanlon was right, after all," Lowe said, and choked on the words.

They found nothing to say after that until the impressed urgency of their mission reasserted itself and they turned back to the job at hand. There was still Venus...

THEY did not rouse Hanlon from his hypnol stupor until the *Terra IV* fell into her spiral orbit for planetfall. Geddes broke the news to him then, steeling himself against Hanlon's biting irony.

"So you were right," Geddes finished baldly. "Earth is done for. Dead." He was thinking at the moment in terms of cities and governments and cultures; and the Irishman's reaction was sharply disconcerting.

"Done for?" Hanlon said, and hid his face in his hands. "*God—all the little people!*"

He was so quiet after that that the others, busy with the precarious business of landing, forgot him. He was still silent when the *Terra IV* dipped into the first milky mists of atmosphere and a sudden great blaze of white fire lashed up from the planet below and struck her with the crash of a million thunderbolts.

The *Terra IV* staggered, rolled half over

and righted herself with a thin scream of straining gyros. The atomic propulsors faltered, recovered and drove them on into the roiling mists.

"Static charge," Geddes heard himself saying flatly. "So Hanlon was right again. It would have looked like a fuel pile letting go, if anybody were left on Earth to see it."

There was, miraculously, no serious damage. They brought the ship down, stern first, upon the waiting breast of Venus.

"The Silver Planet," Lowe said in the sudden quiet. "It was to have been the New Earth, remember?"

It was not until then that they learned the reason for Hanlon's quiet. Under cover of the landing he had plundered the supply cabinet for a plastobottle of medicinal alcohol, and was far into the process of drinking himself blind.

He cursed them thickly when they took the bottle from him. "Go out and claim your planet, you synthetic heroes. I don't want any part of it. I wish to hell I'd stayed on Earth."

They went, prompted by a conditioning that fell just short of posthypnotic suggestion, but this time they did not make the mistake of leaving their stowaway free. They overpowered the raging Hanlon and strapped him to the radio couch again before they put on their airsuits and went outside.

They climbed down the long personnel ladder and stood together on alien soil, feeling the brief thrill of accomplishment anticipated and allowed for by their Foundation mentors. But their elation was short-lived. They remembered what had happened to Earth and that there was no going home again, and there remained only the dreary routine of exploring a world that would never be used.

The ship had landed beside a clear, shallow river, a sluggish tributary feeding a larger river that emptied in the distance into a steaming, horizon-bound sea. The sky above was a smooth silver shell, with a vast circular rainbow surrounding the spot where Sol hid behind miles of vapor-laden air. The terrain undulated, closely turfed and dotted with wooded knolls, from the river upward to a low line of foothills that guarded a purple range of mountains be-

yond. Between the ship and the hills, undisturbed by the uproar of the *Terra IV's* landing, a scattered herd of fat, piebald creatures grazed comfortably.

They set about their business methodically, filling their little sterilized boxes with samples of air and soil and vegetation. Lowe went down to the edge of the shallow river and drew a bottle full of water, leaving behind him in the mud great shapeless tracks that looked more like the spoor of a mailed monster than of a man.

He brought it back to Geddes and Hovic, and the three of them stood with their prizes in their hands and looked at each other dumbly.

"Why do we have to go on with this?" Lowe asked. "Why don't we just go into the ship and push the pile up to critical mass and go up with it? What's the use?"

THEY were trying to think of an answer when they saw the boat coming across the river—a clumsy thing jerry-rigged from salvaged sheets of alloy, rowed by two women who were unmistakably human. Both women were dressed in brief utilitarian garments fashioned from pale green parachute silk. Their bare arms flashed white in the silver sunlight. Their red hair blew long and free in the wind.

Hovic found his tongue first. "Hanlon was right again. The Connors brought the *Terra II* down safely after all!"

The makeshift boat touched shore. The girl at the bow stood up, cradling an outmoded blast rifle in her arms.

"Throw away your weapons," she called peremptorily. "And take off those stupid airsuits. We'll have a look at the kind of men you are before you're welcomed to our planet!"

They discarded their belt guns gladly and shucked off the clumsy airsuits, breathing the warm air with the relief of men suddenly awakened from nightmare. They went down to the water's edge with the feeling of destiny upon them.

In the boat, their first shock was the knowledge that they were not guests, but prisoners. The two women retreated warily to the stern, significantly holding the blast rifle ready. Geddes and Hovic rowed. Lowe tried patiently for conversation.

He learned little except the bare fact of their presence. The girl with the rifle was Myrna Connors, and her sister was named Glenna; Their mother and an older brother had been killed in the landing crash of the *Terra II*, and Sean Connors himself, a hopeless paraplegic from the same catastrophe, waited at the camp for his daughters to return. Both women were under thirty, handsome in an elemental fashion, patently hostile and utterly without feminine restraint of manner.

They listened without comment, either uninterested or uncaring, to Lowe's account of what had happened to Earth. Neither of them, Geddes thought, could have been more than seven or eight years old when the *Terra II* crashed. They had seen no human being except their father for eighteen years and they felt no compassion for a world they had all but forgotten.

They reached the Connors' camp in mid-afternoon, when the solar halo was just touching the western horizon. They were on the higher ground of the foothills now, where the air was cooler and the few open swales were carpeted with fragrant, butter-yellow little flowers. The camp itself was a primitive thing, a hundred-foot stockade of wooden stakes driven Kaffir-wise into the soft soil to enclose three flimsy, thatched-roofed huts.

Myrna Connors held them with her blast rifle outside the central hut while her sister went in. There was a brief murmur of voices, the girl's mingling with a man's hoarser muttering. When Glenna came out again her attitude had altered indefinitely, and when she looked the three men over her eyes held an odd speculation.

"Father will see you now," she said. "Don't argue with him. He's very weak, and argument upsets him."

They found Sean Connors propped upon a ragged couch made from a salvaged acceleration chair, a frail and twisted old man with a bald, freckled scalp and a wild tangle of bristling red beard. The piercing blue stare he turned upon them had the unnatural heat of a mind brooding long past the point of safety.

"So they killed themselves off," he whispered, and made a coughing sound that might have been laughter. "And you're the

best they could send to keep the race going."

He blinked angrily when Geddes tried to speak. "Don't argue—why else do you think you were sent here, with Earth an ash heap behind you? But there's one too many of you. You'll have to draw lots."

He flew into a senile rage when they stood silent, and they saw that he was wholly obsessed by the idea. "Would you argue with Fate, you fools? Or did they send me a crew of unnaturals, with no use for women?"

He went into a fit of coughing, choking on his own fury. When they went out again he had subsided into a querulous muttering, the vacant babble of his voice lost in his tangled beard.

The two women were waiting outside. Myrna Connors had put aside her rifle and her stare had taken on some of her sister's brazen speculation.

"Father's right," she said. "Glenna and I have talked it over, and there's something about the three of you that makes you too much alike for a choice. You'll have to draw lots."

"You'd settle it like that?" Hovic demanded incredulously. "You'd have us just toss a coin, or draw straws?"

She bent her head toward the hut to listen to the old man's ravings. "Father won't live longer than another month or two. After that, what else is there? What difference does it make?"

They stood there blankly while the prismatic solar halo slipped down to the vague, far skyline. A cool wind sprang up, heavy with the smell of the yellow turf-flowers, and somewhere on the plains below the piebald grazers hooted at each other with a sound like the muted lowing of doves.

"You're right, of course," Geddes said. "We've got the race to think of, as well as ourselves. We'll draw lots."

THEY moved away to the compound wall, leaving the women to stare after them with open impatience. Geddes took up a dead twig and broke it into three pieces, two long and one short.

"There's more to it than this," he said, keeping his voice down. "Regardless of our opinions. And our opinions aren't what they

would be if we hadn't been so thoroughly conditioned to—"

"You forgot something, Ged," Hovic cut in. "What about Hanlon?"

"I haven't forgotten Hanlon," Geddes said. "That's why I wanted to talk to you in private. Because we've been given a chance, by a miracle, to start over again from scratch, this time with knowledge enough not to make the old deadly mistakes. We're stable, and Hanlon isn't—that's why the Foundation chose us and rejected him. And we can't take the chance of having Hanlon cutting in here with his carping hedonism and his way with women, don't you see? We can't risk letting a wild strain like his into the new race. It isn't going to be easy, because we're conditioned against personal violence, but we've got to get rid of Hanlon."

They stared at him, digesting the idea.

"It doesn't have to be violent," Geddes argued. "He's under hypnol already. We've only to keep him that way."

Lowe shook his head. "I couldn't do it, Ged. I couldn't force myself to it."

Hovic was tougher. "It's the only way. Hanlon begged a handout from us and then stole our chronos to smuggle himself here. He'd never let us alone. He'd make such trouble that we'd have to kill him in the end. Why not now, when it's easier?"

"Then it's settled," Geddes said. "Two of us, the winners, stay here. The loser goes back to the ship and to Hanlon. Ready?"

They nodded. Geddes held out his closed fist, the tips of his twigs barely showing.

Lowe, his underlip bitten palely between even dentures, drew the first long straw. Hovic drew the other. Geddes opened his hand and stared down at the short twig on his palm. Somehow it had not seemed possible that *he* should lose; it was like death, a thing that happened only to others.

"Good enough," he said. "After all it was my idea, wasn't it?"

He moved away with the twig still clutched in his hand. By nightfall he had retraced his way to the river and the *Terra IV*.

HE WAS sitting on the dew-wet turf with his back against the personnel ladder when he heard them coming. A cone

of light fanned into the darkness from the open port above him, poking a yellow finger into the mists and shedding a diffuse glow that reached to the river below.

Hanlon lay on the grass beside him, shaved and bathed and dressed in clean shorts and singlet. He had eaten enormously after Geddes woke him from the hypnol, and under the tedium of their waiting he had dozed off, his chest rising and falling in the even rhythm of sleep.

Hovic and Lowe splashed through the water and came up out of the darkness, their hair streaming, eyes shining whitely in pinched faces. They were muddy and dirty—and beaten.

"You didn't do it," Hovic said hoarsely when he saw Hanlon. "Thank Heaven for that. How did you guess?"

"I've sat here all night, thinking about it," Geddes said. "I thought about the two of you up there claiming your rights as winners, and I should have gotten a vicarious excitement out of it. But I didn't, and finally I knew why. They threw you out, didn't they?"

They avoided his eyes. "It was awful," Lowe said miserably. "They were—furious. I wanted to die."

"So Hanlon was right again," Geddes said. "Doesn't that mean something to you, that he was right every time? He knew instinctively from the start that a man's natural belligerence springs directly from his sex, and that the Foundation wouldn't risk its making trouble among us on the trip. So they—eliminated it. That's why I brought Hanlon out of hypnol, because they hadn't gotten that far with him before he washed out. Because he is our last hope of keeping the race alive."

The three of them stood and watched the play of dreams across Hanlon's sleeping face with something like awe in their eyes.

"I was just wondering," Lowe said, "if something like this may have happened before? If the whole thing may not be like one of those old parchment writings the archaeologists dig up, where an earlier story has been erased and a newer one written over it? A palimpsest, I think it's called . . . How do we know where *we* came from, in the beginning?"

Geddes stooped and shook Hanlon awake. "You'll find the boat by the river," he said. "You're starting out fresh with a new world, Hanlon. Take care of it."

THEY had climbed the personnel ladder and were closing the port behind them when they heard the splashing of water as Hanlon swam the river. A moment later his high, ringing yell drifted back and was lost without echo on the plain.

"He didn't waste time on the boat," Hovic said, enviously.

They were strapping themselves in for the *Terra IV's* final flight when Geddes laughed for the first time since the blast-off.

"I think Lowe's right," he said when they stared at him. "I wish I could come back again, after a few hundred generations. I wonder what a whole planet of Hanlons would look like?"

" . . . and therefore we can say with certainty that we did not descend from Earthmen," Mach Bren concluded his report to the Venusian Archaeological Society. "For how can we possibly conceive of kinship with a people whose skin and hair are black?"

The meeting was widely televised, and over the face of the Silver Planet a hundred million other red-haired Venusians shook their heads in shocked wonderment and agreed with him.

*Why had five spaceships, each tested again
and again right down to its tiniest rivet, started
for the Moon and ended up in Hell?*



GRIM GREEN WORLD

by JOHN STARR

I LIT the last cigarette I would ever smoke and took my airtuit out of the compartment under the control-board. The two-man cubicle was coffin-cold even under the blast of sunlight pouring through the forward port, and the air smelled of stale tobacco and machine oil. Beside me Charlie Kosta's voice droned into the communicator, winging back two-hundred thirty thousand miles to the listening millions of Earth.

"Our air is nearly gone," Charlie said. "We have about twelve minutes left for deceleration, but we'll never make landing.

The Luna V is riddled like a sieve, spewing out heavy-water fuel along with her air . . . it's a miracle that a chunk hasn't crashed through our fuel pile or the communicator—or through us. That's what blew up the first four ships, we know now . . . if men ever reach the moon they'll first have to develop some sort of armor that will turn this barrage of meteoric dust."

I got my feet into the plastoid suit and pulled it on, letting the transparent head-piece dangle over one shoulder like a parka hood. Charlie watched me with his tight grin, waiting through the three-second lag

of time for Earth's answer. Some high-ranking general down there had pushed aside the Moon Foundation scientists to make himself heard; his voice came over the hiss of static with a tinny, frantic ring.

"Meteoric dust couldn't possibly pierce that alloy hull! It was tested over and over—"

We waited him out, knowing that his frenzy was not for us nor for the success of space flight. He was concerned, like all the military, only with the establishing of a moon base to overlook Earth, an all-commanding launching site that would control a world. Once that base was established, the ferment of war would come to a bitter end; one nation would own the planet.

"But you didn't test the hull out here," Charlie said patiently when the general had finished. "You can't imagine the *speed* of these particles. We've no protecting atmosphere to vaporize them, as Earth has, and they streak through the ship so fast that they seem to strike both sides of the hull at once . . . I'm cutting you over to Leonard Nugent now. Ready, Len?"

It was what I was waiting for. I had looked forward to this moment every day of the nine years I had spent being groomed for the flight, and for half a lifetime of drilling before that. The waiting was almost over.

"I'M READY," I said, and took the microphone. "But there's not much point in reporting further, is there? With her fuel leaks the Luna V will go like an A-bomb the instant we try to use the landing jets, just as the first four Lunas did . . . the air is getting thinner, so thin that I'll have to put on my pressure suit soon. Are there any questions?"

My only answer was the grind and roar of static.

I could guess why; they were bickering and quarrelling among themselves down there, the military men snarling at the scientists and the scientists snarling back, each blaming the other for this new failure. The loss of the first four ships had been a mystery until they sent the Luna V out with co-pilots, equipped for full two-way communication. Charlie and I had reported from the beginning of the flight in alternate

thirty-minute relays, keeping the Foundation posted so that if anything threatened us they would know the nature of the danger. Now they were getting what they had asked for, and the problem would keep them busy for another ten or fifteen years while the conquest of space marked time. But they couldn't accept even temporary defeat calmly, of course—they had to quarrel among themselves, just as men have quarrelled since they first climbed down out of their trees and set about organizing the business of killing each other.

"We're going to try for a landing anyway," I said into the microphone. "We're going to cut in the decelerator jets as soon as we pass out of the sun glare and into the moon's penumbra, where we can see."

We flashed suddenly into darkness, lost instantly in the vast conical shadow of the moon. The night half of the pocked globe loomed below, faint and ghostly in the blue Earthshine, craggy and desolate, cold as space and as old as time. Earth hung above and behind us, and I couldn't help thinking of the astronomers who had followed our flight patiently every inch of the way. They couldn't see us now; the daylight crescent of the moon lay between the Luna V and the sun, burying us deep in the utter darkness of space.

Charlie took the microphone, speaking this time not to the Foundation but to the millions who sat gaping at their radios. Some of them would be muttering maudlin prayers for our safety, some would be gleefully collecting the bets they had made on our chances of getting across; all of them would be thrilled to the core by the vicarious imminence of danger and death.

"We don't want mourning and demonstrations," Charlie said. "If you people listening to me would like to honor our memory and the memory of the men lost before us, then forget space travel for a while and try to work out a lasting peace down there on Earth. Because it's inevitable that you'll conquer space some day, and if you aren't ready for it when it comes—"

He clicked off the communicator, and we turned to the port together to watch the little metal sphere that hurtled up out of the darkness past the Luna V. From behind and above us there came a great white flash

of atomic fire that must have blinded for the moment every watching eye on Earth.

"Right on schedule," Charlie said, and swung the Luna V over the darkside rim and across the mysterious other side of the moon, the hidden hemisphere that no man has ever seen.

THE ship was waiting for us there, a sleek, familiar cylinder with airlock standing open.

We went inside and closed the lock and stripped off our cumbersome airsuits, and Charlie flexed his arms and grinned at me. "Lord, I'm glad to get that over with—it's been like nine years of prison!"

"It was worth it," I said. I was remembering the grim green world we had left, shivering a little when I considered the brawling simian hordes who battered their

way up the scale toward a culture that might, unchecked, some day rule the Universe.

"It gives us a few more years before they come swarming down on us with their atomic bombs and politics and their gaping tourists," I said, still using the speech patterns that had been drilled into me for half my life. "We've marked time long enough, hoping for the best. We'll need every minute we've gained to get ready for them."

We went forward then to watch the purple-skinned pilot, hairy and many-limbed and beautifully wrinkled, engage the magnetic drive that would send us flashing toward the planet that was home. Later, in our natural bodies, we would speak the name of that world with reverence, but our clumsy synthetic Earth-tongues could not master its lovely sonic extensions, and so we used another term.

For the time being, we called it Mars . . .



The LAST LAUGH

by BRYCE WALTON

The visitor from Mars was a first-rate howl. Earthmen reckoned he was endowed with all the qualities of all the greatest clowns in the history of Buffoonery. Often though, the distance between humor and terror can be too short to be funny.

THE scarred rocket rolled down street canyons away from United Nations City, wheeled toward Madison Square Garden between jam-packed, crazily-cheering millions of citizens from every nation on Earth.

Confetti snow drifted in colorful storm, wild faces shone through drifts of spiraling streamers. Signs floated everywhere. Neon signs blinked off and on. Signs floated from balloons across the kleig-lighted sky. Welcome hero signs. And even signs shouting:

WELCOME TO EARTH—ZEKE!

They spelled the name wrong, Johnson thought with some dismay. But that's the way it sounded, he decided, when I radioed in ahead that there was a Martian with us.

Spelled ZEKE, the name scarcely projected the dignity of the name's sound in Martian language. But, in thinking about it now, Johnson realized that it was the only way it could be spelled or pronounced in English.

This seemingly insignificant fact bothered Johnson now. He felt a growing uneasiness. The Martian was largely his responsibility, he felt. It had been Johnson who had spent most of the time on the first visit to Mars with the few Martians left in that one isolated mountain village, learning their language and ancient, conservative, almost static culture. Being an anthropologist, among other things, it had been natural for Johnson to have manifested this particular interest.

Johnson had also been the one to suggest that perhaps Zeke might like to pay Earth a visit.

Zeke had readily agreed, but now Johnson was beginning to wonder why. In six months another rocket would go to Mars and Zeke could go home, but meanwhile—Johnson suddenly began to wonder about the possible ramifications of a Martian's first visit to Earth.

He had radioed ahead about the Martian but had given no details. The world awaited its first look at a Martian, the expectation overshadowing their hero worship of Captain Stromberg, Atomics Engineer Hinton, and Professor William Johnson—the first successful navigators of deep space.

Right now, Stromberg and Hinton were straightening their dress uniforms preparatory to the feting promised when the rocket was wheeled into Madison Square Garden. UN notables would be there, everyone of any importance, plus every one who could be jammed into the Garden. The rocket would be wheeled up to a speaker's platform, the doors would open and out would step the three heroes and Zeke.

Johnson looked at Zeke now with a new and uneasy appraisal. He slumped and then as Johnson motioned to him, Zeke gave a series of grotesque hops. His face, like a monstrous soft rubber mask bought in a novelty shop, twisted into a series of fantastic grimaces.

Stromberg and Hinton grinned appreciatively. They thought Zeke was pretty funny. Johnson no longer thought so because he had realized the cultural significance of Zeke's actions. Johnson gestured for Zeke to look through the port view plate.

His rubberoid features, which at times suggested a travesty of something very remotely human, bunched up and then spread



in all directions as though running into yellow putty. "They're welcoming you to Earth, Zeke. 'Welcome, Zeke,' the signs say. You'll be royally entertained. You'll be wined and dined as they say. You're probably the most extraordinary visitor ever seen anywhere."

ZEKE swung his long, stick-like arms, or appendages, whatever one chose to call them, in long arcs like pendulums, back and forth and to and fro. His three eyes spread wider and wider in an expression of such intense and gigantic astonishment that Stromberg and Hinton bent over and held their stomachs with uncontrollable laughter.

The flicker of unease in Johnson's stomach flamed a little stronger. The trouble was that Zeke's culture was so serious, so old and wise and serious, there seemed to be absolutely no sense of humor in it. At least none of any human kind that Johnson had been able to discover.

To Zeke, this being an object of humor had no meaning. Zeke could understand, however, the meaning of ridicule, derision and insults and sadness in their actual and realistic sense, divorced from the necessity of contrast that connected these things with laughter, gags, jokes in the human psychology.

So Johnson had never explained to Zeke that he was being laughed at, nor what it would mean if he did know he was being an object of laughter. Somehow now, Johnson wished he hadn't lied, that he hadn't explained to Zeke about Stromberg's and Hinton's laughter: "Well, Zeke, that's a kind of appreciation humans express to each other. It means they accept you. A form of politeness, a social amenity."

Zeke was saying in the peculiar slurred, high-pitched Martian speech. "It is overpowering, so many of you humans! Even in our most ancient records there is no account of there ever having been so many of us as I see of your kind out there!"

"That's only a small percent of the world's population," Johnson said. He took hold of one of Zeke's boneless, spongy arms. "Come on. We go on up now to the air-lock doors. In a few minutes we'll be out of here and you'll be presented to the world."

They were inside the Garden now, the rocket being moved by a giant crane to a position beside the speakers' platform. A ramp was connecting the two. The doors started to open and Stromberg and Hinton stood with stiff, glowing expectancy.

Johnson stood behind them, holding on to Zeke whose eight-foot body slumped with its own peculiar kind of expectancy. In all his 32 years Johnson had never been exactly a social animal. Devoted largely to field work, he had accustomed himself either by choice or necessity or both to an extraordinary degree of isolation. The two years in space hadn't bothered him. He was somewhat anxious to see his friends, but not overly so.

In fact the sight of those countless gaping faces, the packed masses of humanity, had frightened him a little. It had been so utterly peaceful out there in space, and on the high, cold plateaus of Mars.

Odd how formidable seemed the prospect of meeting this gigantic social obligation of facing the whole world. Maybe two years away from Earth was too long.

He could hear the interminable speeches droning away outside the opening doors.

Everybody was waiting out there on that platform.

Presidents and envoys from the Big Three nations, and many slightly less important figures. Everybody who could possibly claim to be anybody.

"From now on," whispered Hinton, "we live like Kings! A pension for life. And a hero forever. The dames—"

"Quiet, please," whispered Captain Stromberg.

Hinton dropped back. He nudged Johnson. "Even the thing here, your friend that walks like a man, will be treated by the world like a prince."

Johnson squeezed Hinton's arm and Hinton winced. "Watch what you say, Hinton. It knows some English now."

"You treat it like it's a human being," Hinton said.

Johnson had no answer to that except agreement. Changing Hinton's attitudes was something else again. Johnson didn't consider the project quite worth the time and trouble. He shrugged.

"This is it," Johnson warned Zeke.

Every time he talked in Martian his jaw ached. It was quite a feat.

The present speaker's voice like a worn soundtrack was saying:

"... and now, waiting world, here they are ..."

"Ready?" Captain Stromberg whispered.

"... the first to make a voyage to another planet! The first visitor from another world! ..."

Their names being called, and then—

"... and our guest from the planet Mars—Zeke!"

Zeke shifted his undulating, boneless length as the four of them stepped out onto the platform and into the glare of flood lights, and a sea of smoke and the heat of human bodies. Johnson got the impression, though he couldn't actually see much of it, of a colossal ocean of humanity, great tides of flesh held temporarily motionless and soundless. Microphones slid down. Television and motion picture cameras moved in and back and in again.

Lawrence Spaulding, President of the United States, flanked by big-wigs from the United Nations, moved toward the four. Hands came out, gloved and grasping.

"I—" began the President of the United States, Johnson watched his lips moving but what he said was buried under the onrushing, rising, roaring flood of sound.

Johnson was noticing how the others on the platform were gradually having their attention diverted by the appearance of Zeke. His hands were suddenly moist, and his stomach felt hollow. All of them were beginning to grin. It was universal—he should have known—whenever any human being saw Zeke—laughter.

He didn't know why, exactly, but he decided this was bad, very bad. Even the Russian Ambassador was grinning as Zeke grimaced at the strangeness about him.

As long as Zeke didn't know he excited laughter primarily from everyone, things might go along all right. But that deceptive situation couldn't last long. And trying to make it last for six months was no solution. Johnson's throat felt dry.

Maybe there was no solution. Maybe it was just a devil of a blunder—period! Several scientists spoke at length after the cheering died down enough. Stromberg,

and Hinton were introduced. They talked at length. Johnson was introduced. He was asked to talk about the surprising discovery of intelligent life on Mars, and about Zeke.

He didn't bother to say much because he knew that they weren't really listening. He watched Zeke. The Martian was restless. He made faces at Johnson. He was utterly alone amidst thousands of people, a world full of human beings, Johnson thought. I'm his only point of contact with any living thing, and that is most inadequate. How does he really feel? Desperate probably. Confused. Probably very lonely. And nothing that he does or says will be interpreted realistically—

He bowed, stepped back to where Zeke was amidst a storm of applause. Now every eye was focused on Zeke. Zeke whispered to Johnson in a raspy, high-pitched voice that only added to his humorous appeal because of contrast due to his giant and grotesque body. "I am having difficulty breathing."

"Hold on a while," Johnson said, managing to smile at everybody. "I have a big apartment we can go to, and no one will bother us there. You can rest. It's air-conditioned. It'll be cooler there too."

JOHNSON prayed. The thing had to get over with fast. He felt afraid for Zeke now. The novelty, the magnitude of the thing was over. They had to get out of here.

His uneasiness had been growing. Those on the speakers' platform were grinning more widely at Zeke's antics. The uneasiness was growing into a kind of fear. And then he heard someone introducing Zeke.

"Oh no," Johnson whispered. "Wait a minute—he's not up to this . . . not now . . ."

"What is the trouble?" Zeke asked.

The United Nations Secretary was introducing Zeke. Something about inter-world friendship . . . the beginning of an inter-world union that would spread to the stars . . .

Someone was saying in Johnson's ear. "Go ahead. You act as interpreter . . ."

"What is everyone looking at me for?" Zeke asked.

"You are to make a speech like the rest of us," Johnson whispered dryly. "Just say

something . . . anything . . . something short. They won't know what you're saying anyway. Just a gesture—"

To Zeke everything was deadly serious. A long historical background had made the Martians that way. They were old. "About how much I want to learn about you here on Earth? How I will enjoy my stay here? How glad I am that the Earth and Mars are in contact and are friends?"

"Yes, yes, anything. Just a formality anyway."

"But I think that I am somewhat afraid," Zeke said. "Things I am not accustomed to. Too many people. Too much noise and confusion. And the air. I cannot seem to breathe properly."

The air was thinner on Mars, Johnson thought as he stepped toward the microphones again, in front of television eyes. But it's the air here too—the people—the suppression—

Zeke was there standing beside him. Johnson stepped aside. Zeke stood there in his place. Johnson's knees got weak. He felt the sweat running down his face then, and the cold shivery feeling as though he'd suddenly contracted a high fever. The laughter was starting. It was starting around the platform as the big spotlights caught Zeke full, and it spread backward and upward, growing and expanding.

Zeke, in his alien way talked, and he gestured with his entire body as he talked sincerely, with deep feeling, about how he felt about this first visit to Earth. The laughter rose higher and more voluminous until Johnson's body began to quiver as though from some physical assault. The trouble was a complete misunderstanding of Zeke, his grotesqueness, the fact that no one had any idea what he was really saying. What his gestures meant. All that—and whatever it was in human beings that made them laugh.

Zeke leaned toward Johnson, yelled in his ear. "Look, they are all doing it now."

"Yes," Johnson managed to scream. "They like you. They're all stirred up with excitement. Think nothing of it. They're expressing their extreme excitement and appreciation—"

The twistings of Zeke's body, his facial distortions as he sought to express himself

in the best and most intelligible manner, grew more intense. Laughter became a sweeping thunder. No one could hear Johnson's interpretation. He stopped interpreting.

Zeke came back away from the cameras and microphones. No one but Johnson realized his growing panic. Johnson said to someone, "The air's bad for the Martian here. I'm taking him back inside the rocket. You say something."

The man who happened to be a highly important figure in the United Nations Supreme Court, an Englishman named Gordon Humphreys, nodded. He was grinning, yet Johnson seemed to see a glint of understanding in Humphreys' eyes.

THE rocket held out most of the thunder. Zeke sat in the corner. His eyes were frightened, confused. "They certainly do appreciate me a great deal, do they not?"

"Yes," whispered Johnson. "They certainly do."

"I do not understand. But it would seem that all of this is not being treated with due seriousness."

Johnson said, "Don't try to figure us out down here, not this time. We discussed that, Zeke. Society and the individual here is too complex. Specialists here, psychologists, trying to figure that out about themselves are running into difficulty. Just take it as easy as you can and don't get too curious. We'll get you out somewhere where you won't be bothered much, and you can study at your leisure. Remember, you only have six months of this, then you'll be on your way home to Mars."

Zeke said, "Yes. Martian culture must have been complex like this once, but that was very long ago. It seems to frighten me a bit. This—what you call laughter. There seems no analogy for it in my own language or culture. Why is it directed in such volume specifically at me? I mean as a sign of appreciation and like, why is so little of it going on between two or more of your own kind? I do not—"

"You know the meaning of tragedy, sadness, bereavement. We have an opposite. Laughter. You make people very happy, Zeke. You make them enjoy themselves very much."

Zeke thought about this.

Johnson forced a laugh. "You see you shouldn't try to figure it out! Just make your visit here as enjoyable as possible. It won't be long before you'll be on your way back home—"

"All right," Zeke said. "I want to study here. I want to take back to Mars an understanding of humans."

"If you take that back you'll take back more than anyone I ever heard of has to give," muttered Johnson.

The immediately subsequent events were too incredible and fast-paced for Johnson to cope with with any degree of effectiveness. With Zeke, he was swirled away in a mad maelstrom of activity. He went with Zeke on a crazy toboggan ride that gained momentum all the way toward an end Johnson was horrified to imagine.

The newspapers and television and newsreel cameras started the toboggan going. They started the whole world laughing at Zeke. It was too big a novelty to be ignored by American advertisers, or by any other agencies standing to profit from the greatest novelty in history. Zeke seemed to have all the qualities of all the greatest clowns in the history of clowndom, plus unique characteristics of his own which in turn seemed to bring out something else in the misty realms of human psychology where so much was suspected but of which so little was known.

Johnson tried to object but he couldn't without revealing the truth to Zeke. Besides, Zeke wanted to please. He wanted to make people like him and his kind. He wanted humans and Martians always to get along, so he went along with compliancy on the crazy ride.

They insisted that Johnson get a cut of the fabulous profits accruing from Zeke's endorsements, his television, radio, and stage performances. Johnson refused. The money went to charity. He explained that to Zeke. That made Zeke feel good for a while. He appeared at benefit performances. Everywhere, everyone was laughing louder and louder. Johnson somehow kept Zeke convinced that his lectures were received in the serious regard Zeke intended . . . that the laughter was only appreciation and so forth.

During a tour, Johnson stopped off in Chicago to see a friend. A clinical psychologist, Philip Billington. Johnson had lost weight. His nerves were frayed.

Philip's study was comfortable. And there were cool drinks and dim light, and Johnson sat there like a man paroled another day from a death chamber. Philip, a quiet little man with a rather prominent nose and soft eyes, regarded Johnson quietly for a while.

Finally Johnson said. "Physically I'm not built for it. Martians only sleep six hours out of every three weeks of Earth time. I have to keep up with him, try to keep him from being completely sucked up by—"

"How are you helping him?"

Johnson explained. "He doesn't know what laughter is. I mean what it is in his case as far as his audiences are concerned. I'm not sure what it is myself. Except that it's pretty horrible!"

"The whole thing's rather horrible," Billington agreed. "Are you doing anything to get your Martian out of all this madness? I'll admit that it could result in something tragic. If you've been keeping him in ignorance—"

"What else could I do? What if he found out he's regarded as a clown, a buffoon, a ludicrous, sham-clumsy sort of animal? I've written out a full report to the United Nations, and I've contacted James Hatcher, a UN lawyer friend of mine and he's working on it. So far there's been no results from either source. I say there must be some legal angles."

"Maybe there is," Billington mused. "But I'm just a psychologist. You say Zeke has no sense of humor? Rather an abstract term. Even to us, humans and psychologists alike, the anatomy of humor is pretty complex, contradictory, confusing and inconsistent."

"But why do they go so insanely hysterical with laughter at Zeke?"

"Why? There's a question all right, Bill. It's contrast in humorous situations, such as this one, that sometimes makes it horrible. In this case it's the fact that people are laughing at what we know is something deadly serious, which only makes it more grotesque. Add to this the vast cultural differences, the unbridgeable gap, the psy-

chological isolation, and you have that thin line between farce and tragedy—"

"There's never been anything like this though," Johnson moaned. "It's all out of line. Here we have the first visitor from another planet. An important, dignified individual, and the world regards him as a buffoon! Something's got to be done!"

"I agree. But what?"

PHILIP looked at the ceiling, then back at Johnson. "Humor. What are its basic elements? Surprise. Aberrancy. Ah, we have that element. Oddity, singularity, peculiarity, nonconformity in what is supposed to be a well-ordered world. Also irrationalism, we have that too. A form of aberrancy. Zeke acts in a manner people regard as foolish, mistaken, ill-advised . . . oddity of character behavior. People like this kind of humor; it allows him to feel superior. Here we find the element of sadism in humor, you see. Humor can be horrible in retrospect, or looking at it from a distance. Kinds of humor change. They used to write jokes about burning witches alive. Cripples and insane people used to be funny."

"All right," Johnson said. "But there's something more here."

"Yes. Yes, there is. I think I have it, some of it anyway. There's a connection between terror and humor. Build up a suspense, an anticipation of terror, then present something harmless, and you get a tremendous relief through laughter. People have been conditioned to fear the alien, particularly the alien from outer space, and particularly the bogey-man Martian who has been popularized in fiction for a long time. Maybe the whole world's reacting to Zeke as a kind of anticlimax. A long build-up to expect some fearsome monster, maybe with super weapons capable of wiping out the Earth in one fell swoop of deadly rays, and then they get Zeke!"

"And add to that the other free-floating anxieties people suffer in a too-complex society, sourceless fears they don't even realize exist. They project all that into the surprise twist too. And we get a world practically prostrated with laughter because they expect a monster and get the most, to

them at least, exaggerated kind of loping, rubberoid, harmless clown."

"But a clinical diagnosis doesn't help Zeke any."

"No. No, it doesn't. Not now anyway. It might—"

"The UN should do something. America's exploiting Zeke for commercial purposes primarily. Zeke isn't a guest of the United States. He's from another planet. He's really visiting the whole world. No one nation—"

Billington nodded. "I hope something happens. I hate to see you in such a state, Bill. Pretty soon, if you don't snap out of this and find some solution, you'll end up coming to me for treatment."

Johnson needed treatment when Hollywood decided to make a movie featuring Zeke. He didn't go to Philip Billington though. He fought this to the end but the fight was futile. They gave Zeke a good sales talk, and of course it wasn't Johnson's position to tell Zeke what, or what not, to do. He had trapped himself nicely so that he couldn't explain to Zeke the real reasons for his objections.

The movie was called **MARS INVADES THE EARTH**. They told Zeke it would be a semi-documentary; that it would assure good relations between Earth and Mars and acquaint the whole world with Martian culture.

There was a special preview showing in the United Nations Cultural Building in United Nations City. Johnson was there, waiting in the lobby for the fiasco to end. He had seen the first part of it but had been unable to stomach the rest. He paced nervously back and forth across the lush carpet wondering how Zeke was taking it. It wasn't at all what they had led Zeke to believe it was. It was pure fiction in which a Martian monster invaded the Earth with a weapon capable of blowing the world into component atoms, but the Martian was so funny he conquered the Earth with laughter.

Johnson could hear the UN Officials invited to the showing laughing uproariously in there. What—what would Zeke be thinking now?

He stopped pacing. Zeke was in the lobby with him, and the picture wasn't

nearly over. Zeke's whole body stood there very stiffly. Johnson felt sick.

"You have been lying to me," Zeke said. His face twisted with that odd rubber-mask plasticity that seemed to be so funny.

"No, Zeke, you've got to let me explain."

"All this time you have never told me the truth about this laughter. Everybody thinks that I am funny. They look upon me as something ridiculous."

"I—"

"They lied to me also. This picture is not what they said it would be. I heard them talking in there. They did not know I was sitting there by them in the dark. I found out why all this laughter should be always directed at me! Why at me? Why always at me? I have found out!"

"Zeke—!"

"What is this humor of yours? What is so funny that gives you satisfaction in freaks and fools? In the misfortunes of others? You think we Martians do not know what this laughter really means? Maybe we know. I guess it is just that we knew a long time back and have forgotten it. Now I know what it is and what it means."

JOHNSON was trying to say something.

It didn't make any difference now. Laughter came from inside the big auditorium. Zeke's huge ungainly body loped toward the exit. He turned. "I do not want to see or talk to you or to any other human beings. I do not like to see or talk to any of you any more. I will go to your place, if you will permit me to do so, and there I will seclude myself until your next rocket goes back to Mars. I do not want any one to come out there to see or to talk with me. I do not want to be in any more television shows or radio broadcasts or moving pictures."

"All right!" Johnson yelled above the laughter. "But let me take you to my apartment. How you going to get there? You can't speak English."

The guard stood in front of the exit. He turned and grinned up at Zeke. He began to laugh as Zeke swung back and forth, wanting out. Zeke made gestures and spoke. "I wish to go outside. Would you be so kind as to step out of the doorway, please?"

The guard had no idea what Zeke was saying, nor what his movements meant. All the guard knew was that Zeke was a Martian bogey turned clown and he laughed louder. "You will step to one side, please."

Johnson started toward them.

"I wish you would step aside and stop laughing at me," Zeke said.

Johnson started to yell something but he was too late. He knew there was no malicious intent in Zeke's action, only desperation, confusion, bewilderment, humility. He pushed the guard out of the way, but his strength was much greater than Zeke was used to exerting under any such circumstances.

The guard hurtled ten feet away. Johnson heard the sickening thud of his head against the wall. Johnson ran over there, saw the open, staring eyes of the guard, and then he saw Zeke running across the rain-splattered street through the neon-shining dark. He saw a few people stop and wonder a moment, then laugh.

Johnson leaned against the wall and closed his eyes before he went to the public phone booth. He could still hear the laughter from the auditorium as he called the police.

They figured Johnson would know where Zeke was. They questioned him for what seemed hours. He had no idea where Zeke would go to hide or where he would be now. Zeke could speak only a few words of English. No, Zeke wouldn't harm anybody. Yes, I know he killed the guard, but that was an accident. A misunderstanding.

No, God no! I don't know where he would go!

Yes, yes, I'll make tape recorded messages to be broadcast to Zeke. I'll make some television kinescopes too. Maybe Zeke will hear me and give himself up without any trouble. Play the recordings and show the kinescopes on every station in the city.

Sure I will. But why don't you send out broadcasts and telecasts to the people instead of to Zeke? That would be more logical. Tell them not to be afraid of him. That he wouldn't hurt anybody. Tell them not to incite any more confusion in Zeke.

I know, I know, somebody hit Zeke with a cane, but he wasn't trying to attack the old man! You've got everyone scared of him

now. A few hours ago everybody was laughing, and now you've got everyone thinking he's some kind of horrible monster.

I know . . . the woman wheeling the baby. But she was hysterical when she saw Zeke there on that side street. She screamed and went crazy. But that isn't Zeke's fault. That's your fault. No! I said I don't know where he would be hiding now!

You can leave now, Johnson. But stay where we can get in touch with you at once. You're the only way we can establish any contact with Zeke—unless of course we have to kill it.

SO JOHNSON made the tape recordings and the television kinescopes, and he sat in a kind of daze in the semi-darkness of the apartment of Hatcher, a friend of his, looking at his own image speaking Martian to millions of people, and listened to his voice.

No one knew what he had said on those lengths of tape and on those kinescopes. He hadn't said what he was supposed to say—not for Zeke to give himself up. Zeke might not understand that, and he might get shot. He told Zeke to meet him just outside the UN grounds at the West end of a public park that had been built to replace a former slum area—to beautify the area surrounding the UN territory. A high wall flanked the West end of the park and thick brush and trees were there affording a good hiding place.

And Johnson would meet Zeke there as soon as he could. Don't do anything else, if possible, until I can talk with you, Zeke.

The newscasts came on frequently, mostly about Zeke. He was seen first here and then there.

The city was supposedly gripped in a reign of terror. Kids playing in a vacant lot near the UN grounds had dug a small cave and had found Zeke hiding in it. The Martian had made horrible sounds and leaped at them, the kids said. The kids had thrown rocks at him. They said he looked funny at first, all covered with dirt, and stumbling around like he was drunk or something.

The police had thrown up nets and blockades everywhere. The number of cars in surrounding precincts were tripled. Walls

went up everywhere. State, county, sheriff deputies' cars formed wall after wall that were tightening. Information about the crime and a description of Zeke had been spread over such a wide area from the crime scene that five states away the police had thrown up blockades. The description was a formality.

Everyone knew what the Martian looked like.

Johnson waited there in Hatcher's apartment.

He tried to get in touch with the lawyer, but that seemed impossible. No one knew where Hatcher was. But Johnson knew the police were shadowing him, hoping he would lead them to where Zeke was hiding.

He had to get over there to that park where Zeke might be hiding, waiting for him, without being trailed there. That wouldn't be easy. It was out of Johnson's line.

The newscast said that Zeke had blundered into someone's estate near the UN grounds and had had a couple of big dogs sent after him. In protecting himself, Zeke had killed the dogs. It would seem that killing the two dogs was worse in some ways than if Zeke had killed two more human beings.

No one, of course, even remembered ever having laughed at Zeke. He had become the typical alien Martian menace, a Welles and Wells character. A monster from another world, a bogey Martian, a menace, a stalking terror, an inhuman monster.

"They'll kill him," Johnson whispered. He got up and got Hatcher's topcoat out of the closet and put on Hatcher's hat. "They'll kill him and he won't have any idea what's happened or why." That's the worst part of it, he thought. Somewhere in the rainy dark was Zeke, feeling terribly the hostility of his human surroundings. Confused, desperate, panic-stricken. Not understanding any of it.

Johnson went out into the hall of the apartment-hotel. Empty. The police would be guarding the front entrance certainly, maybe the back. But there was another exit out of the basement into the vacant lot, and maybe they wouldn't know about that.

He went down into the basement, went

out that entrance and into the vacant lot among the dripping trees. He stood there, listening, watching. He put his hands in Hatcher's topcoat pocket and felt the small snub-nosed revolver there. He jerked his hand out.

He heard nothing but the rain on the palm fronds and the tires humming on wet pavement. Above him, the gray night's hand cupped over the city, reflecting its neon life through misty rain.

He went cautiously through the trees, through a pit being excavated for building, and emerged onto the street a block and a half away. And still no one.

He walked faster, signaled a cab. He sat there stiffly and numb with tension as the cab took him with casual speed to the park.

HE WALKED slowly along past the high dense brush of the park next to the wall, his shoes squeeshing on the wet turf. Beyond the wall he could see a tall bulky building with little yellow window eyes that blinked in the rain. Absently, he remembered it was the big Community Hospital.

"Zeke," he called as he walked past the high dense brush. "Zeke."

He went the length of the park's West end, started back, continuing to call Zeke's name. The strange alien whisper sent a chill down his arms.

"Mr. Johnson—"

The brush shivered. Zeke had heard the message all right. "Mr. Johnson. I am ill. I am cold and I am tired. I do not have any idea what to do."

Johnson said. "Come out here, Zeke. You have to turn yourself in to the proper authorities here that maintain law and order. I've explained something about that. I promise you it will be all right. You've got to trust me, Zeke."

"People are afraid of me. They throw stones at me and run away when I approach them. I cannot understand—"

Johnson explained quickly that the guard Zeke had shoved was dead. "It has to be straightened out, that's all, Zeke. Then things will be all right."

Johnson saw the shape back there in the dim wet shadows under the wall, crouching,

hardly distinguishable. He saw Zeke for what he was, a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible. Too bewildered now to understand, too weary to see anything, too anxious perhaps to care. Alien, sick, abominably unhappy, taken out of his knowledge, bitter in utter loneliness, his home so far away—so very far away.

It moved toward him, rising up, rising taller, its undulating hugeness bending and swaying above the brush. It stood unsteady on its legs, its rubberoid flesh dripping and shining. Surrounded by the wet night, Johnson saw him as something cast out mysteriously by the sea on some alien shore to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness. Zeke's body shivered all over suddenly. Johnson sucked in his breath, felt the quick sick emptiness. He turned. Shapes running, footsteps slipping and scrambling toward them out of the brush. The glint and shine of uniforms and guns. They had trailed him after all—

"Stop, don't move! We'll shoot!"

"Don't!" Johnson yelled frantically. "For God's sake, listen." Zeke's grotesque body crashed backward and Johnson saw the bursts of orange flame flowering to horror in his brain. Shots blared flatly. Zeke went up, over the wall and was gone on the other side.

Johnson scrambled into the brush. He felt the gun in his hand and he felt himself squeeze the trigger once, twice. He was screaming. "Stay back, you crazy fools! I'll shoot anyone I see moving in here!"

"What's the matter with you—hey—that you, Johnson?"

"He's flipped," someone shouted.

"Johnson! You'll get yourself in a lot of trouble. You might kill somebody."

"He's crazy," someone said.

"You guys crawl back and go round into the hospital and round up the Martian."

Johnson crawled along the wall on his hands and knees. He kept crawling and then, wedging himself between a tree trunk and the wall, edged up the wall, over it, and dropped to the other side. He ran across the grounds desperately looking for Zeke.

He saw nothing on the grounds, no sign of anything or anybody. Then he saw Zeke up there in the gray drizzle, three

stories up on the fire-escape platform. He didn't yell. He ran and then he felt the harsh wet cold of the metal as he climbed.

He followed wet tracks down the floor of the hall, found a door. As he started to open it he saw the police come around the corner at the other end of the hall. They stopped when they saw him. Johnson heard laughter coming from beyond the door. The laughter got louder. The shrill, high, spontaneous and abandoned laughter of children.

The police moved cautiously toward him. Johnson opened the door and went in, shut it quickly behind him.

A nurse came over to Johnson, smiled at him.

She stood with her arms folded and stood beside him and the both of them watched Zeke in the middle of the big hospital ward.

"We're so glad Zeke came back," the nurse said. "And surprising us this way makes it so much delightful for the children."

Yes, thought Johnson dully, Zeke was here before, once. A benefit performance. For crippled children. And neither the kids nor the two nurses in here had heard about Zeke's sudden status as a criminal. No radios in here—only recording machines playing pleasant things for the kids. Too much unpleasantness on the regular programs.

An isolated world in which they still saw Zeke only as a clown.

The kids on the beds lining the walls, many of whom would never leave this room except in wheeled chairs, were screaming and hollering and shrieking with laughter at Zeke's antics. Their laughter bubbled higher and louder. Zeke twisted round and round, his arms swinging, as he did a shambling jig, danced this way and that. "The clown's back!" "Dance, dance, dance some more!" "Stand on your head, Zeke!"

"They have so little real happiness," the nurse said. "I've hoped Zeke would come back. Nothing here has ever made them happier and laugh more loudly than Zeke."

Johnson walked through the waves of free wild laughter to Zeke's side. He whispered.

"Stay right here, Zeke. Don't leave

this room until I give you the word. These kids really appreciate you, Zeke. Believe me, I'm not lying this time. These kids are happy now, because of you, and they don't have much happiness. Life's worth living right now for them, Zeke. And it's because of you. Stay right here."

"I am very sick," Zeke said. "I will do as you say. I cannot go further."

JOHNSON backed to the door, managed to smile to the nurse, and went into the hall.

Quickly he shut the door as the police rushed in. Captain Maxson, in charge of some detail or other, a short heavy blond young man, eager to do his duty, grabbed at Johnson.

"You go blundering in there to get Zeke," Johnson said, "and you'll not only take a chance of injuring or killing some of those kids, but what's worse, you may frighten them, disillusion them for the rest of their lives!"

"But that monster's liable to start killing in there," whispered Maxson hoarsely.

"If you go charging in there anything can happen. Let me do it my way and there won't be any trouble."

"What's your way?" Maxson obviously was in a bad predicament.

"Let me make a phone-call first, then I'll take Zeke out and there'll be no trouble. I can handle him. That's your only chance. You don't want to hurt those kids, shock them! They don't know what's happened. They still think Zeke's funny."

Maxson touched his lips. "All right. Make the call. I'll give you ten minutes—"

This time he found Hatcher in. He quickly explained the situation. "Hatcher! You said you'd have the dope from Humphreys at the UN."

"And I have," Hatcher said. "It's all right now. I'll rush a couple of UN Deputies over there with special orders right now!"

"Well hurry!" Johnson yelled. Then he stepped out of the booth practically into Maxson's arms.

"Now, go in there and get him out here, Johnson!"

"We're waiting for two United Nations

Deputies. They'll be here in a minute. They're going to take charge of Zeke from now on."

"What—well, okay, let them arrest him. That's a load off my back—"

"They're not coming here to arrest him. But to protect him from being arrested or otherwise annoyed until he goes back to Mars."

"I don't get it at all. I got orders—"

"Here's how it is," Johnson said. "Now that we've established relations with another planet, Mars, the UN has jurisdiction over all such relationships and transactions. UN City is extra-territorial. It belongs to no nation, including the United States; and therefore the United States has no jurisdiction over Zeke, or anything having to do with inter-world relations."

"That's a UN problem. Furthermore, Zeke is here in the capacity of Martian Ambassador, and the UN has been officially declared the site of the official future Martian Embassy, and therefore Zeke has diplomatic immunity. That guard's death was accidental, caused by a misunderstanding. But regardless, he can't be tried by any nation on Earth because the accident occurred on Martian Embassy grounds officially."

"If Zeke's ever tried for any crime it will have to be on Mars. That's the rule."

And that was the way it was.

After seeking Zeke off in the second Mars-bound rocket, he went to Billington's and sat in his study, relaxed for the first time in six months.

"How was Zeke?" Billington asked. "Seem to feel any better about his visit to Earth?"

"Much better," Johnson said. "In fact, he seemed to feel better about the whole thing than at any time during his stay here. He said he understood a great deal more about us than he might otherwise have learned."

"And he said he understood our laughter too. A safety-valve, he said, and that he was glad if he allowed us to let off a little steam. He said there was a lot of steam here that needs to be let off."

Billington smiled. "That's a concise and astute analysis," he said.

"It seems to be the laughter of those crippled kids that did it," Johnson added. "Zeke got an idea there how beneficial laughter is."

Billington nodded. "However, maybe Zeke's analysis is overly-simplified." His mouth set in a serious line. "The laughter of kids is hardly comparable to the laughter of adults. The kids were laughing *with* Zeke. Does he realize the difference there?"

Johnson said. "Maybe he doesn't. The Martians have a lot to learn about human beings."

"So do we," Billington sighed.

The ILLUSIONARIES

by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

Every master-Neshantan knows a dreammaker is proof against dreams. On their planet it was an inviolable law . . . yet a passel of bow-legged, fun-lovin', half-pint cowboys shot it to a stink-star.

COMMODORE BENEKER viewed the dawn with satisfaction. It was a strange sun that hoisted itself out of the horizon. A big, brilliant, yellow-colored orb much more impressive than the one that shone over his home world of Neshanta in the region of Bootes. This primary turned ghostly trees into shapes of living emerald, brought birds piping from their nests and warmed the dew-dampened ground in less than half a time-unit.

But his gratification was not born of these idyllic features. He was duly appreciative of them since he had eyes to see and ears to hear. Being on a strange and possibly antagonistic world, he nursed a viewpoint generated by the circumstances, which viewpoint insisted that the birds and trees were of less importance than the fact that no snake was yet evident in this Eden. There could have been snakes by now, a dozen of them, a host of them, lying in the grass waiting for the dawn and emergence of the first unwary Neshantan.

There could have been an ambush if the ship had been seen to come down. True, it had descended in the gloom of the night, with rockets silenced and the counter-gravs taking the weight, but it had not been invisible. A pale moon had limned it with silver during one or two brief breaks in the clouds. Moreover, it had fallen while surfaced with a peculiar aura of pallid purple flames which disappeared at instant of ground-contact.

Beneker thought uncomfortably of that moment. The earth-touch had been marked by a superswift and violent crack and the purple flames vanished and most of the

crew dropped flat on their bellies as they gave up a couple of thousand volts.

It's risky work, roaming around. Any world is likely to greet you with a conk off its own bat. If you survive that, the inhabitants line up for their turn, holding in their mitts or assorted grippers a multitude of devices capable of anything from setting fire to beards to automatic and instantaneous skinning.

That's why Beneker felt pleased with himself, at least for a little while. On that pink world they'd left in a hurry before coming here a spiderish creature had discovered them, blandly squatted outside the door biding the dawn, and when Chief Engineer Formel stuck an inquiring head outside it had pursed thick black lips and produced an excruciating sound that addled his brains for all time. Formel was still strapped down and would remain so to the homegoing, if he lived that long. It was a mode of space-travelling that Commodore Beneker had no desire to emulate. So he looked at the sun, the trees, the birds, and was gladdened by what wasn't there.

He stepped outside onto the grass and still nothing happened. No whirr of attacking wings, no flick of a poisoned dart, no brain-tearing whistle. Just the sun and a yawning world not fully awake.

"Hah!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. He could not expand his chest since he wore his skeleton on the outside. That feature, plus the long, feathery antenna sticking out of his hair, made him resemble an overgrown and upright insect, a three-foot-tall praying mantis. He was not an insect. He was a Neshantan.

Second Engineer Dith and Astrogator Molop joined him on the grass. Their exit was made with the airy confidence of those who've seen it tried on the dog.

"Nice morning, Commodore," ventured Dith. He smelled the air, tested the springiness of the turf.

"Not too bad a morning," Beneker conceded, giving him the frozen eye. "Seeing that you have been denied the pleasure of slamming the door upon my dead body."

"You were too quick for me," said Dith. "I had planned to be first out."

"Me, too," declared Molop.

"By the giant sun of Neller," exclaimed Beneker as he studied the cowboy, "it's almost too easy to be true. Think what you like, and they too think it."



"So not satisfied with having Formel tied up like a pornicker meditating his sins, you want to get yourselves laid out and thus incapacitate the entire expedition?"

"Oh, no, Commodore." Trapped between joint implications of cowardice and sabotage, Dith sought a plausible escape, found it and said with grossly exaggerated humility, "I thought I could best be spared."

"Me, too," declared Molop, radiating virtue.

"A reasonable assumption," agreed Beneker, thus dexterously damning both of them.

He waved a chitinous limb at the landscape. "There is nothing to indicate that we have been observed. That is the main thing; not to be seen coming down. It seems that we have achieved it."

"Unless it takes them a long time to get here," suggested Dith.

"There is a village a mere two and a quarter linids away," Beneker informed. "I could walk it myself in less than a time-unit."

"Me, too," indorsed Molop, lending his authority to the estimate.

Beneker rasped at him, "Who the space-demon asked you?" Without waiting for a reply, he went on, "The longer we sit around the greater our chances of being spotted. We aren't conspicuous in this valley, and we're in an area where traffic is sparse, but these creatures have air-machines from which they could see us almost any time. So let's get moving. Call out the crew."

THE crew emerged and lined up twenty strong. Their eyes raked the surroundings warily, their antenna quivered as they sought hostile thoughts radiating behind this clump of trees, that outcrop of rock. None of them shared Beneker's confidence in momentary safety and many would have been glad not to share Beneker.

Looking them over with singular lack of pride, Beneker remarked, "As sloppy-looking a dollop of murts as I've seen since Rimbot crash-landed in a garbage-dump." He was pleased to note they resented that. "And as sweet-smelling," he added for good measure. His jaundiced eye went along the line until it found the fidgety one at the

end. "You with the jelly-like jerks, are you carrying passengers?"

"No, Commodore."

"Better make sure. No knowing what's been picked up on the last ten worlds. Neshanta won't thank us for a cargo of alien nibblers and gnawers." He scratched himself at the thought of it. "Get cleaned up while you have the chance. Jump to it, we've little time to spare."

Hastily divesting themselves of harness they brought spray-guns out of the ship and doused each other all over. That done, they lined up again. The atmosphere was pungent with anti-parasite fluid.

"We're going to test our powers on the local talent," Beneker informed. "A couple of guards are required to watch over us. I need two volunteers." He pointed an authoritative finger at Mushab One and Mushab Two who, as their names showed, had come from a double-yolked egg. "You and you!"

The Mushabs obediently stepped forward, each taking a dim view of this method of offering one's services.

"Well," said Beneker, with the weary air of one compelled to seek genius among imbeciles, "here they are, our guard. Standing to attention, ready and prepared for the fray." He waited awhile, staring at them while they gaped back, then finished with false cordiality, "If the aliens attack we can trust you to spit upon them?"

A spark of revelation came into their eyes. Turning, they went into the ship, brought back weapons.

"That is better," Beneker approved. "It was thoughtful of Neshanta to arm us, was it not? It showed foresight. We shall not be dependent upon spit, shall we?" Getting no answer other than twin blinks of embarrassment, he shifted his attention to Dith and Molop. "On the last world but one Wenk and Formel explored with me. There were other pairs on previous worlds. It is high time you two had a turn."

"But . . ." began Dith.

"Go get your hand-projectors. You're coming along whether you like it or not. I know of no reason why any two should be exempt from risks. Besides," Beneker went on, "have you not agreed that you can best be spared?"

There was no answer to that one. Glumly they fetched hand-projectors, buckled them on, taking plenty of time about it. The crew hung around and mooned at them, watched the trees, the rocks, the hill-crests. Much of their original enthusiasm had been sapped by that pink world's spider.

"Ten planets," grumbled Dith, fiddling with his harness. "Three fertile but full of brainless life. Suitable for settlement only if we tackle all the hard work ourselves. Then two more worlds completely sterile. That was the first solar system. So we try a second, this one. And what do we find?"

He shot a glance at Beneker and, encouraged by that worthy's lack of remark, continued, "Worlds big enough to crush us and with satellites either sterile or full of life-forms too dim-witted to be of use. A pink world crammed with eight-legged menaces. Now this one."

"So what?" inquired Beneker, with heavy sarcasm. "Did you expect to find a Neshantan heaven in the first ten out of all these millions?" He swept a hand to embrace the cosmos.

"It's not that," said Dith. "It's just a feeling that bad luck or good luck hangs around the right suns."

"Gross superstition! A sun cannot determine the suitability of the various planets around it." Then, aware that such a statement could be argued, Beneker modified it with, "In limits, of course. We choose suns approximating most closely to our own. That makes sense."

"Yes, I know. It's just a feeling I've got that this particular solar system is a waste of . . ."

"The space-demon take your feelings! If I went by such illogic I'd never get anywhere." Irrately, Beneker turned to the nearer hillside, started upward through the trees. He went at a fast pace.

Dith trailed after him, muttering. "Maybe the need is urgent but, all the same, we ought to be limited to six or seven planets per trip. Enough is enough. Sometimes I get sick of it."

"Me, too," said Molop.

"You'll be sicker before you're through," promised Beneker, his hearing sharper than they had thought.

They went silent. The brothers Mushab

mooched in the rear, bearing their heavier weapons with dumb resignation.

THE testing-place was ideal for its purpose. A narrow dirt road ran along a little valley with low but well-wooded rises at either side. To the right, the hillocks gave way to hills and those in turn to mountains shining in the far distance. Way over to the left the outskirts of a village could just be seen.

There was every facility for close concealment within a mere quarter-linid of the road. This was plenty good enough for the task in hand. Posting the Mushabs higher up the rise and well separated to provide cross-fire without Neshantan casualties, Beneker laid himself flat under heavy bushes. With Dith and Molop close by, he watched the road, directing his attention mostly toward the village.

It was a dreary wait. The world was still yawning and slow to arise. Nothing could be seen stirring among the distant houses but finally thin bluish shafts of smoke began to drift from a few roofs.

Beneker filled in the time with warning lectures. "Don't get over-excited when one approaches, like Wampot did on that third world. We aren't here to pick a fight. Our job is to check on their possible usefulness as slaves."

"Yes, Commodore," agreed Dith, who had no yearning for a fracas anyway. He eyed the sun through a leafy gap, decided he did not like its color, size, degree of light and heat, or anything about it.

"When one of them appears he will look strange. That is inevitable, as you should know by now. But what of it? No matter how he looks or what weird abilities he possesses, he is a prospective article of utility so far as we are concerned. All we need do is lie low, keep calm and test his responses."

"Yes, Commodore."

"That and no more," insisted Beneker, determined to educate the less fortunately endowed. "No matter how intelligent and dexterous these creatures may prove to be, they are of no use to us if we cannot control and direct their intelligence and dexterity. Without control, we shall have to do all our own labor." He was revolted by the

thought of it. "Neshantans were created to direct the energies of other forms, not to perform lowly tasks themselves."

"Me, too," said Molop, piously.

Beneker rolled onto one side in order to glare at him. "Was that a deliberate impertinence? I suppose you think you're doing too much doing and not enough directing on this trip? Let's all boss the ship, eh? Everyone a space-admiral, eh?" He motioned higher up the rise. "Very well, you can do something more right now. Go see whether those dopey egg-friends are still on guard. And go carefully."

Molop crept quietly away, not so much to please the Commodore as to avoid giving the Mushabs the jumps. That pair had a habit of doing things simultaneously and more or less on mutual impulse. They were likely to let go first and then look to see what had bounced.

"Sometimes," commented Beneker, when Molop had gone, "I think that low-quotient murt talks too much."

"Me, too," agreed Dith, absently.

"Did you have to say that?" Beneker yelped.

"Sh-h-h!" Dith became alert, his antenna vibrating. "Look, Commodore, something comes!"

THE something kept on coming, at steady pace, along the dirt road toward the hidden watchers. It was still too far away to discern fine details, but one could tell that it was a higher life-form rather than a mere animal. In the first place, it had come from the village and was proceeding unattended by any master-type, walking alone, casually, confidently, of its own initiative. In the second place, it was clad from feet to neck in artificial coverings, its attire neatly made and close-fitting. Lastly, it was carrying some sort of implement.

Drawing nearer, it revealed itself as a burly biped in dark blue overalls and wearing heavy boots. His arms were shorter and thicker than Neshantan arms but his hands were very similar, each having four fingers and one thumb. His broad, brown-skinned face was marked with a strong blue-black stubble and had unchitinous flexibility. Evidently his skeleton was internal like those of the Neshantan slave-races. The thing he

was bearing upon one shoulder could be recognized as an axe—not the huge, half-moon-shaped thing with which the observers were familiar, but still an axe.

"I cannot pick up his mind," whispered Beneker. "Can you?"

"No, Commodore," said Dith, all eyes. "Perhaps he is not employing it at the moment."

"That is unlikely. It is well-nigh impossible to exist with a completely empty mind. Even an idiot's head is full of folly."

"Well, I can't pick up his," admitted Dith.

Beneker mulled it a moment. "He may resemble our slave types. We have never been able to get more than incoherent fragments of thought out of them. They are sensitive receivers but extremely poor projectors. Their neural radiation is almost nil." He brightened considerably. "If this creature is the same type we are indeed in luck."

"Perhaps his mind operates across a different band," Dith suggested.

"If so, he won't get our pictures and we won't be able to deceive him." Beneker crouched lower. "We'll soon see. I am going to try make him take his boots off."

"How?"

"I am putting a stream across the road." His antenna bent toward Dith's. "Quick! Get this picture and duplicate it. We'll try it out at double force for a start."

Picking up the other's mental vision, Dith waited for the word of command. Twenty more paces would bring the unwary biped immediately to their front.

"Now!" hissed Beneker.

Together they put an imaginary stream across the road, striving to drive the vision into their victim's mind as vividly and realistically as possible.

The biped took six more steps, stopped, stared at the road. Then he scratched the back of his neck and said something unintelligible. His voice was a low and chesty rumble. Moving cautiously forward to get a closer look, he bent and dipped a finger into what wasn't there. Then he looked at his finger.

"It looks wet," projected Beneker.

"It looks wet," simultaneously drove Dith's mind.

Obviously convinced, the biped turned

away from them to trace the flow of the stream down the opposite slope. With the swift finesse of those to whom the aptitude comes naturally, the concealed watchers extended their illusion, taking away trees and bushes, building a waterfall over a ledge of rock, adding a few floating twigs and bits of bark.

Coming back to the middle of the road, the biped considered a moment, made up his mind. His thoughts remained undetectable, though at this short range his brain emitted a rapid series of meaningless pips and pops like the chopped-off peaks of his wave-forms. Evidently he overlapped the Neshantan frequency band by a percentage too small to be useful.

He reached a decision. He did not remove his boots as Beneker intended. Instead, he walked straight ahead, his gait slower and more deliberate than before.

"Wading!" realized Beneker, with triumph. "We made it a little too shallow but we fooled him!"

Though immensely pleased with himself, he kept his full attention on the other, not relaxing for an instant. When Neshantans built a dream they did it properly, a bang-up job in complete detail.

So when the biped came out of the stream his boots looked wet, felt wet and seemed to make sloppy squelching sounds. His feet felt cold and wet. Even the bottoms of his overalls appeared to be stained a darker blue almost to knee-height. Several artistically-placed splashes of dampness showed above the knees, each with its own tiny area of coolness. Natural talents come mighty close to perfection no matter how outlandish by the standards of elsewhere.

Stamping his feet hard, the biped cast a final, slightly puzzled look back at the stream, hefted the axe more comfortably on his shoulder, continued on his way.

"Zimpo!" ejaculated Beneker, not too loudly. "Success!" He patted himself with satisfaction. "How about your unlucky sun now? Doesn't this more than compensate for brain-twisting spiders?"

"One creature is hardly sufficient for a test," said Dith. "There may be special reasons for his susceptibility. He may be the only half-wit in the village, abnormally

credulous and with a wave-band peculiarly his own."

"He may be a pornicker in a trance," scoffed Beneker. "Or he may be somebody a spider whistled at. But I say that worked out beautifully. All we need do now is try two or three more by way of confirmation. Then home we go with news of a suitable slave-world."

AT THAT point Molop crawled back. "The guards were awake and jumpy. They came within a hair's breadth of blowing me apart."

"If the hair had been thinner," Beneker assured, "I would have been sorely grieved."

"Me, too," said Molop, fervently.

Beneker gazed prayerfully at the heavens and inquired, "Look, have you ever created the vision of a vast hole filled with flames?"

After some thought, Molop answered, "Yes, many years ago when I wanted a slave to . . ."

"Next time you create it," Beneker interrupted, "kindly do me the favor of jumping into it."

Dith nudged him. "Another one comes."

"Keep low!" warned Beneker, banging the unfortunate Molop's head into the turf. "At this stage we cannot afford to be seen." He looked along the trail.

The newcomer was another of about the same size and build as his predecessor but his clothes were not the same, a wide-brimmed tan hat shaded his face, and his body clothes were in two distinct pieces separated by a belt. To top matters, he was riding on the back of a big, brown, four-legged creature.

"A nice problem," murmured Dith. "If the biped is a slave, what is the quadruped which is carrying him?"

"Your premise is shot to a stink-star," Beneker gave back vulgarly. "The two-legged is not a slave—yet!" He noted that the subject of their interest was coming on fast. "It would be useful to discover whether the lower form can be deceived along with the higher."

"It would be equally useful to discover why they can be deceived when there is so small an overlap."

"I have solved that problem," Beneker informed. "I think that like our slaves they do not use the full capacity of their brains. They employ only a part. Hence, the wave-band on which they think is only a portion of the far wider band to which they are inherently sensitive. We're hitting them across the full width." His voice petered out as he flattened himself still more. Then he added, "That brown creature is swift. Hurry, put the stream across and let's throw in a little depth this time."

They made the stream complete with eddies and ripples. It was wider than the oncoming horse was long and its depth was sufficient to reach above the animal's knees. Dith noticed a bug on a nearby leaf, copied it mentally and had another bug on a leaf drifting lazily in a tiny backwater. Beneker added a few Neshantan water-plants, vague and shadowy in the bottom so that they would not be noticeably different from whatever water-plants this world possessed.

At a steady jog-trot the rider came on, his attention on the distant mountains. The hidden Neshantans feared that he was going to go right through their mirage from sheer absent-mindedness when the quadruped slowed of its own accord.

The rider glanced downward, stopped his beast, took off his Stetson and bent forward to peer over the quadruped's neck.

"I'll be damned," he said. Like the other he looked upstream, noted the provided waterfall and added, "This country is sure changing fast."

Shoving his hat back onto his head, the rancher shrugged and urged his mount forward.

THE pony immediately went ahead. It had uttered no sound nor displayed any surprise.

Nevertheless, it lifted its legs higher than before and ploughed forward like an animal going through deep water.

Ghost-drops splashed upward complete with mock-glitterings in the sunlight. A little wash widened behind each leg, spreading V-shaped, making phantasmal leaves swirl and bob.

Emerging, the horse emitted a loud snort and broke into its jog-trot. The stream and

the waterfall dissolved like swept mist, leaving only the dusty trail.

"By the giant sun of Neller!" exclaimed Beneker, "It is almost too easy to be true. Think what you like and they too think it."

"Providing it is plausible," Dith qualified.

"That is understood, Bugbrain."

"I know," persisted Dith, "but what I meant was that we aren't sufficiently informed about local conditions to tell what is or is not convincing. For instance, I put a little insect on a leaf in that stream. I copied one which was near my face. But supposing that in a moment of forgetfulness I had put a bright red water-skater with button eyes? If there are no such creatures on this world . . ."

"The moral of that is not to be forgetful," Beneker reproved. "It would be a mistake to alarm them or arouse their suspicions just now. Let them rest in blissful ignorance until we return in strength to take them over."

He peered up the trail toward the mountains. The rider had gone from sight.

"This path is not frequently used," he commented. "We may have a long wait before we can make another test." He stood up, stretched himself to his full three feet of height, confident in remaining unseen. "You two lie low and keep watch. I'm going back to the ship to make sure the crew is being energetic about the cleaning and overhauling. Don't try any foolish tricks during my absence."

"No, Commodore," promised Dith.

Beneker gave Molop a sardonically inquiring eye and said, "May I assume that goes for you too?"

"Yes, Commodore," said Molop, happy at being in sweet accord.

"I thought it would," remarked Beneker, with unpleasant pleasantness. He slipped away.

Dith sighed and said, "Now he's gone, let's relax. Sometimes I wish I were a slave."

"Why?" inquired Molop.

"A slave has his dreams. They are created for him, custom-built to suit his heart's desires, real enough to be as satisfying as the really real. That makes him contented."

"What dreams can we have? None at all! We can seek refuge only in our own imaginations and that is like pursuing the shadow of a shadow. An illusionary cannot delude himself or be helpfully fooled by other illusionaries. That is a natural law. I wish someone would abolish it."

"Why?" asked Molop.

"Because then you could build a dream or two for me." Ignoring the trail, Dith lay flat on his back, meditatively studied the leaves and branches overhead. "You could conjure for my long-starved delectation a certain female with a beautiful gray-green shell whom I once met during a spring feast on Neshanta. All I can do is lug her out of my memory and dump her into my imagination. But if I were a slave, you could make her real for me." He sighed again, long and deeply. "So wonderfully real!"

"Um-m," said Molop, wistfully.

"But a dream-maker is a dream-resister. He cannot be deceived by another's projections. Sad and unfair." Dith yawned, blinking at the sun-gaps between the leaves. "Anything coming?"

Molop had a look at the trail. "No."

"As if I cared." Dith mused awhile. "I still feel that we ought to try another sun. I have forebodings about this one." He closed his eyes and did not bother to roll off his back until he heard Beneker returning.

FOR sheer lack of a subject to work upon, the three Neshantans were compelled to laze through several time-units. It was high noon before another prospect appeared.

This one came the opposite way from the first two—out of the mountains and toward the village.

Again a biped, he was old, ill-dressed and on foot. Rheumy-eyed and with a ragged beard, he trudged along bearing a bundle hung on a stick.

"The two previous tests were mainly visionary," Beneker whispered. "Let's try out a predominantly tactile job this time. It will give us a worthwhile check on his nervous system."

"What do you propose?" asked Dith.

"Let's afflict him with some gnawers and nibblers. We can't go far wrong with that. If the cosmos has a universal law, it is that the unwashed become bug-ridden."

Scuffle, scuffle went the biped's worn and gaping boots as he mooched along with minimum lift of feet.

"Now!" breathed Beneker.

They projected together, all three of them, each providing his own quota of biters and his own intensity. It was irresistible.

The victim stopped dead in his tracks, waggled his eyebrows, smote himself in ten different places. It didn't do any good. He tried twenty places at twice the speed and greater force. That brought no improvement either. So he became really vigorous about the matter, getting to work on himself in the frantic fashion of one who could do with six pairs of hands, maybe a couple of wooden mallets and a fence to rub against.

Beneker generously increased the supply, sending an imaginary regiment of crawlers down the small of the biped's back. That was the last straw. With amazingly intensified animation, the subject shot off the trail, took refuge behind the opposite bushes and tore off his clothes. That gave the watchers some worthwhile information about alien anatomy.

For some weird reason nobody could understand, the afflicted one resumed his boots before carrying on with his campaign.

In this incongruous attire, he shook his underthings repeatedly, beat them on a rock, gave them close examination. All the time he was muttering deeply in his beard. A few visible crawlers were supplied to lend verisimilitude to the occasion, and these he picked off and pinched between finger and thumb.

Still muttering peevishly, he dressed himself, picked up stick and bundle, again trudged toward the village. His expression was sour rather than puzzled, suggesting that he viewed what had occurred as a familiar condition which somehow had built up to critical mass.

"Here's a chance to check on range," Beneker told the others. "See how far we can get him. Give him a slight itch when

I tell you." He let the subject progress some forty steps before he said, "Go!"

They were rewarded with an irritated scratching. Another forty steps and they tried again. The victim raked himself and voiced a few words that seemed to give off sparks.

The third attempt was a flop—the subject had got beyond illusionary range.

"About one-twentieth of a linid," Beneker estimated. "H'm! A fair average. He looked a stupid, insensitive type. We should be able to affect a more receptive brain at twice or three times the distance."

He glanced at the sun now beginning to lower westward, then consulted his time-meter.

"We won't be ready to take off before dusk and there is little we can do if we go back to the ship. We might as well sit this out and test any other fauna that comes along. We'll call it a day when the sun does the same."

"That's all right with me," approved Dith, who liked sitting under a bush rather than cleaning a ship. "But, Commodore, I'm getting pretty hungry." Hastily he added, "And so is Molop."

"*Yuck, yuck,*" exclaimed Beneker. "Now that you've mentioned it, I could savage a gallumpat-steak myself. Go and tell Mushab Two to leave his weapon with you while he fetches rations for all of us."

"Yes, Commodore."

Eagerly, Dith sneaked away. In short time there sounded a loud whump and a tree fell over. Molop opened his mouth but nothing came out.

"Bang goes Dith," remarked Beneker, resigned to that sort of thing. "Those Mushabs never had enough room from the start. One egg—and it has conditioned them for life. I hope the fools have not alarmed the whole village." Parting the leaves, he looked down the trail. He let the leaves fall together and turned his attention back to Molop. "Nothing for it but to try again. Go get the rations."

His expression slightly bemused, Molop got up and made ready to depart. At that point, Dith reappeared, liberally sprinkled with dirt and dragging a weapon.

"The crack-shelled murt popped one at me but he missed by fifty linids."

"Poor shooting," said Beneker. "Has he gone for the food?"

"Of course. I told him to hurry."

"Good," said Beneker, "Now shut up."

THE pay-off came in the early evening with the sun three-quarters of its way down the sky and another couple of time-units to go before dark. Bored by inactivity, Beneker had twice considered giving up the watch and returning to the ship. The tests already carried out were, he felt, sufficient to justify marking this world a free gift to Neshanta.

"Someone coming," informed Dith, who was watching the trail. He waited a moment, counted, "One, two, four of them."

Beneker had a look. The four were halfway from the village. Bipeds, as expected, but there was something queer about this lot.

He continued to look, sensed the queer-ness increasing as they got nearer. Although he was careful not to reveal it, a trace of unease came over him. There were peculiarities about these arrivals that he could not understand.

In the first place, they were dressed so similarly that it was too much for mere coincidence. Standardized attire suggested some kind of uniform and that, in turn, implied officialdom. The dress had a slight resemblance to that worn by the one who'd ridden a quadruped—big hat, colored neck-scarf, two-piece body clothes separated by a belt. Also boots.

But these belts had shaped attachments from which protruded the grips of what appeared to be some kind of hand-projectors.

If so, these were the first bipeds to be seen bearing arms. That would give them a special status, Beneker decided, and special weapon-bearing status must be viewed as ominous.

But it was the weird manner of their approach that bothered him most. They had no steady pace, fast or slow. At one moment they were walking in a bunch, the next they were running in single file. Two of them went off the road to stalk warily around a tree behind which nothing was concealed, and the other two waited for

them. Once or twice they adopted an exceedingly strange gait, a kind of jumping run with knees rising high. It did not get them along any quicker than an ordinary run.

"I do not like this," Beneker admitted to the others. "There is something extraordinary about those four. They are armed and eccentric and that is a highly dangerous combination."

"Do you think they might be coming in search of us?" asked Dith, reaching for his hand-projector.

"I cannot see why they should be. How can they know of our presence?"

Beneker looked again. Now that the four were nearer he could discern that they were a kind of biped unlike those observed before.

Their bearing was self-assured, grim, sharp-eyed and occasionally wary. Their physique was small and compact. Their attire neat and decorative.

They were walking at that moment, but as he watched they again broke into that strange, leg-lifting run, doing it simultaneously as if sharing a group-mind, stringing out one behind the other and heading straight up the middle of the trail.

Then there came a point where something hit Beneker smack in the brain. It landed with such shocking vividness that he gasped, flattened himself to avoid being seen, and kept well down until the four had passed, still at an ungainly, knee-raising run.

Intent solely on whatever was the purpose of their journey, they went by seemingly unconscious of the Neshantans.

Raising himself for a cautious glimpse of the departing figures, Beneker said, "I got a picture out of them! By the space-demon, I got a picture!"

"So did I," Dith's antennas were still quivering. "Their minds don't operate on the same band as the others' minds did, or perhaps they use a wider band, or maybe they are more efficient projectors."

"They were riding," said Beneker, a little pop-eyed. "On quadrupeds. I could even feel the animals' back muscles moving and smell their hides. The first two animals were black and had foam on their faces."

"The third was a kind of spotty gray and

the last was mottled brown and white," Dith contributed. "The riders were going ten times as fast as they were really going."

"Shooting along like rockets," confirmed Beneker. He was dazed and worried. "How can it be possible that—?"

"Look!" chipped in Molop, pointing.

They sent quick gazes up the trail, saw that the uniformed quartet had left the route and concealed themselves behind a large rock. From this lower angle they could be seen huddled closely together in the shadow, but to anyone coming down they would be invisible. No more pictures came from them, being too far away.

"Something is about to happen," Beneker decided. He glanced behind to choose his line of escape, and hoped the Mushabs would function as intended.

Hardly had he spoken than another biped appeared over a slight rise, coming from the mountains and toward the village. He was a huge specimen with immense shoulders, a heavy, pugnacious jaw. No hat covered his thick mop of iron-gray curls. His dress was a dark brown one-piece affair with a slide fastener down its front.

Obviously unaware of the ambush, the newcomer marched steadily past the rock, his boots making weighty crunching noises. The armed quartet edged around to keep the rock between themselves and the other, then sprang out onto the trail immediately behind him.

One of them must have made a slight sound, for the big biped threw a startled glance rearward and promptly broke into a run.

The four emitted a bloodthirsty yell and set off in hot pursuit. At top pace the entire bunch of pursuers and pursued went past the Neshantan hideout, giving the crouching watchers a very brief replica of the foaming quadruped vision seen before.

They raced on, the chasers gaining slowly but surely. Beneker had to stick his head right out of the bush to see what was about to happen.

Giving up all hopes of escape, the fleeing biped suddenly stopped, whirled round to face his enemies, made a swift snatching motion with both hands at the region of his thighs. The significance of that was a puzzler, but it brought superswift reaction.

With expert precision, the four conjured gleaming instruments into their hands. There sounded several thin cracks, made faint by distance. No smoke, flames or visible rays sputtered from the weapons, but the target clapped a hand to his shoulder and reeled back against a tree.

"Space preserve me!" exclaimed Beneker. "They are touchier than the Mushabs." He could not take his eyes away from what was going on.

Surrounding their captive, the four uttered commanding words, made commanding gestures, prodded him with their projectors.

Despite his injuries, he obediently lifted his hands to shoulder height, started toward the village, the others following close behind.

Beneker continued to protrude from the bush like a pornicker mortifying his carcase amid thorns. He watched until captors and captive disappeared into the village. Then and only then did he come to life.

"We are going back to the ship. At once. Tell the Mushabs to pack up and follow without delay."

SAFE in his control room, Beneker tapped his restless fingers on his desk, waited for Dith to return from his inspection of the vessel.

From time to time he glowered at Molop who sat in a corner and held his peace.

Beneker was bothered, irritable and had the fidgets. This was no time to bait him even though innocently.

Dith came in saying, "Formel is still off-beat with the jittering jilps. But everything else is all right. Clean and shipshape from landing-thumpers to astrodome. She's ready to lift any time you say."

"Then I'll say very soon," responded Beneker. "I have reached a decision about this planet. It is no good. It is a dead loss. We would be wise to forget it and seek something better elsewhere."

"Yes, Commodore, that's how I feel about it."

"You can see what has happened," Beneker went on. "It is what I have feared from the beginning. I have not mentioned it be-

fore because there's no point in arousing needless apprehension."

"To what do you refer?"

"A set-up similar to that on Neshanta. A slave world complete with master-types." He sighed, lugged his hand-projector out of its grip, dumped it on the desk, poked it away from him. "What we need, and must find if it can be found, is a world of psychologically suitable dupes waiting for someone to dupe 'em. But nature abhors a vacuum. Demand creates supply. I feel we're going to have a tough time finding a planet-load of dupeless dupes sitting around with their mouths dangling, waiting for us to come along and take them over." He gave Dith a sour eye. "Don't you pass that opinion on to the crew. Let 'em do their own sorting out."

"Yes, Commodore."

"Our best chance lies on a slave world bossed by illusionaries inferior to ourselves," Beneker continued. "We can beat the teeth out of lesser types, especially if they're in smaller numbers. But I wouldn't care to try it here. It is a big and crowded planet. Those master-types we encountered at the last moment undoubtedly swarm like gnawers on an unbathed gallumpat. It was fortunate for us that we spotted them in good time. This world is a trap, and a dangerous one."

"Like the pink world," reminded Molop, becoming suddenly garrulous.

"Shut up!" Beneker edged his hand-projector a bit nearer, making it a sinister move. Morbidly he went on as if speaking to himself, "I would never have believed that this world's illusionaries could have such powers had I not seen them for myself."

"They violated all natural laws," indorsed Dith.

"Yes, that is what I cannot understand. They could impose their visions on us! What is more, they could do it while remaining unconscious of our existence. That is real power!" He mulled it over. "But that isn't all. Incredible as it may seem, they could construct illusions of such immense strength and potency that they could live in them themselves." His gaze rested on Dith. "Could you enjoy a convincing existence inside one of your own dreams?"

"Not in a million years."

"Neither could any other master-Neshan-

tan. A dreammaker is proof against dreams. That's an inviolable law—and they've shot it to a stink-star!" His expression showed that he regarded law-smashing as a personal affront. "So, having abilities we don't possess, they've developed a different set-up. They don't bother to keep their slaves happy in phantasmal heavens. They enjoy the heavens themselves and rule their slaves by force. That means they are well-armed and utterly ruthless."

"They looked mighty tough to me," said Dith.

"I do not like them," Beneker declared. "Not one little bit. I am going to cross this world from our list of possible conquests. In fact, I'm going to delete this whole solar system. We'll take off forthwith and try some other sun."

"That's just what I've been wanting all along," Dith reminded. "I'll be glad to get out of this place."

Molop opened his mouth, whereupon Beneker picked up his projector, flourished it and growled, "If you say what I think you have in mind to say, there's going to be a terrible accident." He paused, finished, "I would deplore a terrible accident."

"I, likewise," said Molop, and got away with it.

The counter-gravs operated. The Neshantan vessel slid silently into the night. It never came back.

THE big biped trod heavily down the village stem, two paces ahead of his escort, a suitably surly expression on his face. Captive and captors stopped only when they came level with the barber shop whose occupant was leaning on the doorpost, chewing a toothpick, studying them speculatively.

"Well, Bill," said the barber to the leader of the escort. "I see you got the low-down, lily-livered skunk."

"We sure did," agreed Bill. He pointed his weapon eastward. "Caught him coming down the mountain trail."

"Nice work." Taking out the toothpick, the barber stared at its ragged end, put it back. "Ain't much use doing half a job, though."

"What d'you mean?"

"Ain't much use pinning him down while his mob runs loose."

"You seen 'em?" Bill stiffened, watching the other keen-eyed.

"Yup. Must've known you were coming. They skinned out fast half a minute back." He pointed down the road. "They went thataways."

Bill poked the captive toward the shop. "You take care of him." He turned to his alert companions. "C'mon, let's after 'em!"

Weapons held ready, the four raced head-long down the road, skidded around the far corner and were gone.

Thankfully lowering his arms, the captive sat on the bench outside the shop, pulled an enormous pipe from his pocket, slowly stuffed it with tobacco.

"I'd appreciate it, Lou," he said to the barber, "if you'd hold off calling me a low-down, lily-livered skunk. Them's fightin' words."

"Yah!" scoffed the barber. He gave the toothpick an expert shift from left to right, looked down at the other. "Jesse, don't you ever get sick and tired being shot up by them kids?"

"Kids? What kids?" The local blacksmith felt himself for matches. "I didn't see no kids." He applied a flame, his cheeks going hollow as he sucked. "That was Wyatt Earp and his posse." The glance he shot upward was shrewd and penetrating. "Remember?"

The barber stared down the road and gradually a faraway look came into his eyes. After a while, he said, very quietly, "Yeah, Jesse, I remember."

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Wreck Off Triton

By ALFRED COPPEL

His plans were thorough. Every risk had been closely considered. Now Ron Carnavon, ruthless convict, was ready to loot the wrecked spaceship of its sapphire treasure, and thrust his warped power around the entire, antagonistic EMV triangle.

RON CARNAVON had been the skipper of the late *Thunderbird*, and it was common knowledge in every port of the EMV triangle that he had scuttled her. There was a price on his head, and the High Space Guard was combing the spacelanes for him—and for the *Thunderbird*. For the *Thunderbird* was a treasure ship.

But Carnavon was a cautious man and no fool, for all that he'd committed barrrary. He left the *Thunderbird* in a Trojan orbit a million miles off Triton, ruptured and spilling corpses into space. He took a spaceboat and jetted sunward to the Hol-

comb Foundation Outpost on Oberon. Then he stowed away on the mail ship to Canapolis, still carrying the chart that showed the *Thunderbird's* position. In the Canal City, Carnavon evaded the lax Guard cordons and found himself a renegade Martian hypnosurgeon to change his face and fingerprints.

From then on it was easy. Across Syrtis Major by sand-ski to Marsport posing as a prospector. And from Marsport down the Grand Canal to the spaceman's boneyard at Yakki. It was there that he met and hired Pop Wills and the *Carefree*.

Ron Carnavon acted with characteristic

caution when he chose Pop and the *Carefree* to do the ghoul work on the ship he had murdered. Pop's ship was a rusty bucket, but well enough fixed to reach Triton where the *Thunderbird's* corpse orbited, her vault heavy with Plutonian sapphires. And Pop needed work badly. He was almost too broke to outfit his ship for the flight. Carnavon noted with curling lip that most of Pop's assets had long ago been liquidated to buy gin. The long years in space had taken a toll of the old man. Actually a greater toll than even Carnavon could have imagined.

Pop and the *Carefree* fitted in with Carnavon's plans to perfection. Pop had been in trouble more than once with the High Space Guard. Pop was an old soak who wouldn't be missed. When something happened to the *Carefree*, the rest of the beached wrecks in Yakki would only shake their heads and agree that Pop had pushed the old bucket a few Gs too hard somewhere. That was just the end the wrecker had in mind for Pop when his job was finished, too.

It was only reasonable. He couldn't let Pop live to tell the Guard that Ron Carnavon had had a hypnosurgical metamorphosis. Even a fortune in sapphires couldn't buy the High Space Guard. It was far too well-heeled with Holcomb Foundation money, and it took its duties to the inhabitants of the Earth-Mars-Venus Triangle seriously. A cautious man would realize this and take the proper steps. In this case the proper steps would be the elimination of Pop Wills when his job was done.

But everyone makes mistakes. Carnavon made one when he selected Pop and the *Carefree*. With all the rusty hulks dotting the ramps of Yakki, and with all the even rustier skippers there, he should have hired someone else. Anyone else. Ron Carnavon should have connected Pop Wills with the twelve-year-old cabin boy of the *Thunderbird*. The youngster's name had been Wills, too. But of course. Carnavon couldn't have been expected to remember everything. Just coincidence—but those things do happen.

So these two lifted from Mars together. A captain who had wrecked his own ship and a gin-soaked old man whose only son

had died because of it. And neither knew the other for what he was. To Carnavon, Pop was just a fall-guy doing his job in proper sucker fashion. And to Pop Wills, Carnavon was just John Smith who wanted to go to Grid M332254-89OK off Triton and was willing to pay well for the privilege.

The wrecker ordered the course and Pop set it. Mars began to dwindle and the Belt loomed up ahead. The *Carefree* threaded her way through the rocky maze and on past Saturn and Uranus in a free-falling arc. She was slow, but in space "slow" is a relative term. The Outer Planets were in triple conjunction and with their help, the old boat made time. Carnavon checked the course daily, and Pop accepted the corrections without protest. After all, John Smith was paying for the trip and he seemed to know what he was doing. No questions asked. Carnavon liked that. No questions, no trouble. He couldn't have been more wrong.

IT'S hard to say in mere words what old Pop must have felt when he picked up the wreck of the *Thunderbird* on the radar. He recognized the image, of course. The *Thunderbird* was unique among spacers. Then he checked her position against the chart that Carnavon had marked and realized why they had come. He realized too who this John Smith was, and hate pulsed through him in sickening waves. Pop wasn't a brave man, and he was past his prime, but he could still hate.

Almost without conscious thought, Pop broke out the Ultra-Wave and began calling the Guard. He broadcast full particulars, co-ordinates, descriptions, everything. He was at it when Carnavon found him and sent him crashing against the control panels with a smashing overhand right to the mouth.

Pop sprawled on the metal decking and watched the wrecker carefully smash every communicating device on the ship's panel. There was a throbbing pain in his head where he had struck the shabbily padded control console, and the thick taste of blood was in his bruised mouth. He watched Carnavon like an animal, a hurt, impotently raging beast. And he began to be afraid.

Even his hate couldn't spare him that, for Pop was afraid to die and he knew just what his chances were now.

Carnavon, on the other hand, didn't waste time hating. He didn't know why Pop had called copper, and he didn't really care. Pop wasn't important. The sapphires in the *Thunderbird's* vault. *They* were important. He'd come too far to abandon them now.

It would take nine minutes for Pop's radio appeal to reach the nearest Guard base, Carnavon calculated. And it would take six hours for the fastest Guard ship to reach them after that. He could board the *Thunderbird* and loot her in not more than two hours. That would still give the *Carefree* a four hour start on the Guard, and in deep space four hours were as good as four thousand. Carnavon still wasn't worried. The wrecking of the *Thunderbird* had been the work of months, and he wasn't going to panic now. Ron Carnavon wasn't that sort of a criminal.

Blaster in hand, he motioned Pop to his feet. He wondered vaguely just why the old man had taken such a chance. He couldn't have any notions of collecting the reward for Carnavon. The amount was less than the amount he was getting for doing this—Carnavon smiled bleakly—salvage job. And the old man was a coward. He could see it in the trembling of the blue-veined hands, in the shifting faintness of the watery blue eyes. The wrecker shrugged aside the thoughts as unimportant and set to work.

With a blaster in his ribs, Pop Wills did as he was told. He braked the *Carefree* to a stop twenty miles from the ruptured hulk of the liner. There were beads of sweat standing out on Pop's forehead and his hands shook on the firing console. A thin trickle of dark blood marred his stubbled chin. His battered lips were unsteady.

For a few bad moments, Pop Wills thought Carnavon was going to blast him as soon as the *Carefree* lost way, but then even his gin-soaked mind began to understand that the end wasn't quite yet. Carnavon needed help looting the murdered liner. If he was going to lay his hands on her valuables before the Guard appeared, he'd have to get Pop working with him.

Maybe if Pop had been more of a man he could have stopped the wrecker cold right there, but long years of boozing had left Pop weak. He could hate well enough, but fear conquers even hate. And that blaster that followed him in every movement made Pop's thin blood run cold. Life—even a life like Pop Wills'—was better than the black void of death. Pop was ready to buy a few more minutes of life at almost any price, even from the man who had killed his boy. The old man was like a rusty watch-spring—battered and wound to the utmost limit. And jammed there. Frozen by the reality of that ugly blaster and the cold eyes behind it, Pop would help Carnavon. He couldn't help himself. And his hate expanded to include his own senile weakness. . . .

THE *Thunderbird* spun slowly in the light of the faraway sun, the rent in her hull gaping like a mouthful of jagged teeth. She had been a beautiful thing once, but she was ugly now in death. She had not died gracefully. Her back had been broken and her innards scattered. She orbited sullenly, and around her spun the broken fragments of her inner body—the bloated, frozen corpses of the men she'd carried. Against the backdrop of the stars and the blaze of the Milky Way, she seemed to be a blot on the heavens. Pop Wills and Ron Carnavon watched her, each of them with his own thoughts. Then the wrecker motioned toward the suit lockers with his blaster.

It took a bit of doing to get into his own pressure suit and still keep the blaster pointed at Wills, but Carnavon was a large man, and supple, and he managed it well enough.

The *Carefree* had no escape boat, so there was nothing for it but to rely on the suit motors to take them across to the *Thunderbird*. It promised to be slow going, for the suit motors were weak and produced only one tenth G of thrust. Almost anything thrown out ahead by a man in a space-suit was enough to stop him cold. The recoil overcame the suit-motor with ridiculous ease and though the motor labored mightily, it would take a long while to reestablish the

original direction of movement. But Carnavon had an answer for that, too.

A quick check of the radar showed that there were still no Guard ships within hailing distance. Carnavon's original estimate of the time it would take the Space Guard to arrive on the scene turned out to be surprisingly accurate.

He connected his suit to Pop's with a short cable and snap-hooks and together they made their way to the *Carefree's* dorsal valve.

Carnavon had no intention of sweating out a long, slow crossing to the hulk, so he ran the lock pressure up high and waited until the outer hatch was lined up with the derelict liner. Then with a sudden movement, he spun the wheel and popped the outer portal. Pop and Carnavon shot into space like grotesque *bolas*. The *Thunderbird* loomed up ahead.

Pop kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. He saw more than an old man might be expected to see, too. For instance he saw that Carnavon—cautious though he might be—had neglected to take an extra magazine for his blaster. That meant that there were just three shots in the weapon. One of which, Pop figured, would be used against the vault of the scuttled liner. Not that the old man was making any plans. He was still too weighted by his fear and his sense of impotence for that. He merely noticed, and prayed to the gods of space that one of those shots in the blaster might not be meant for him.

As they drew near the liner, Pop felt nausea churning his stomach. The ship was surrounded by satellites. Space-bloated bodies, naked and misshapen in the bitter light of the dim sun that reflected off the pitted flanks of the burst vessel. Spread-eagled grotesquely, the corpses circled their ship, puffy things of horror with staring eyes and extended fingers. Other things, too, circled the hulk. Small, commonplace items. A clock, a chair, shattered crockery. Tiny, inconsequential things, all mutely accusing—all muttering silently that their ship had been betrayed by someone who should have protected her.

Pop glanced over at Carnavon. Through the steelglass bubble of his helmet he could see the wrecker's face. There was no ex-

pression on it other than concentration—and greed. Pop knew about greed. He'd lived with greed and degradation a lot in his last few years. He hated Carnavon even more now for having reminded him—but he was still too sick with futility to do more than tell himself that he had done all he could do. He had called the Guard, after all. And then, for an awful moment he found himself regretting that he had done even that and thereby lost all hope of life . . .

Their magnetic shoes touched the *Thunderbird's* hull with a sound faintly carried through the air in their suits. They stood on the curving surface, etched in black against the starry sky. A few feet away from them, the terminator was inching toward them as the derelict rotated slowly.

WITH Carnavon leading the way, they clumped heavily to the ripped and tortured hull-plates where the *Thunderbird* had been sundered. By the light of their helmet lights Pop could see the thoroughness of the wrecker's work. He had been her captain, this Carnavon, and he had known just how to murder her. The outer hull was a shambles and the pressure hull holed in three places. It had been a thorough job. Only one prepared for the sudden horror of her death could have survived it. Pop Wills thought of his boy and sobbed.

The dark companionways were empty, blown clean by the violence of the *Thunderbird's* death. Ron Carnavon led the way down into the ship to the purser's office and the vault.

Rubble cluttered the small room, bulkheads bent awry and pipes and wires littered the deck. Carnavon turned Pop loose and set him to work cleaning out a path to the vault. Pop's breath was coming in shuddering, grating gasps when he finished the work a half-hour later. Carnavon nodded approvingly and motioned him away from the vault.

Pop watched while the wrecker braced himself and took careful aim at the vault's lock mechanism with the blaster. There was a searing flash of blue flame, and red sparks showered as the oxy-hydrogen bolt sliced

into the steel of the door. Pop found himself praying fervently that it would take two more shots.

Carnavon fired again, and the tiny room blazed. Pop muttered shakily under his breath and waiting for the wrecker to blast just once more.

The lock surrendered in a trickle of white-hot slag and Pop felt himself sink low. There was still that one shot left for him—and he wasn't needed now.

The door swung open and Carnavon knelt to rifle the vault. When he at last straightened, he held a pool of jagged blue fire in his gloved hand. The gems sparkled with a life of their own—two dozen faceted beauties—each worth a king's ransom—and each bought with a man's life.

Presently they stood again on the outer hull, under an unreal canopy of stars. Nearby, a ghostly satellite was swinging inward toward the ship. Pop stared at it and back to Carnavon. He began to understand what the wrecker planned. He was going to leave him here—on the wreck. And he would die here. He understood that the shot that remained in the blaster wasn't for him after all. Carnavon wasn't going to waste it on him. There was a spanner in the wrecker's hand and he now advanced purposefully toward Pop Wills.

Pop stepped backwards, retreating from the heavy figure of the wrecker. Fear was surging in waves through him—fear mixed with blind hate and contempt for himself and his senile weakness. Overhead, against the stars, the awful satellite drew nearer.

Carnavon reduced the power in his magnetic shoes and moved lightly toward Pop, the spanner raised to strike. The old man stumbled against a long shard of steel on the hull that floated upward at his touch. Fear paralyzed him, and he stood now, waiting for the blow of the spanner that would smash his helmet and leave him a distended corpse spinning through space. Above him, the satellite spun inward.

Pop glanced up—into the agonized, dead face of a twelve year old boy. He shrieked. The sound deafened him in the bubble of his helmet. All the fear and weakness turned to a bitter hate and surged forward in one insane motion toward his tormentor. The

long shard of steel came to hand like a lance. The rusted, warped old watch spring that was Pop Wills recoiled and unwound in one raging moment. He charged Carnavon.

Carnavon evaded the clumsy charge instinctively. With an almost unconscious motion, he raised the blaster and fired point-blank.

The searing bolt caught Pop Wills in the chest and spun him around, tattered ribbons of charred flesh and melted metal from his suit intermingled. He curled inward upon himself in an awkward graceless fashion and sank to the hull plates, a nimbus of ice flowing from the gap in his suit as the water-vapor and blood spurted into the vacuum. But there was something strangely like a smile on his face as life left him. Pop had conquered his fear at last.

But Carnavon, on the other end of the bolt of fire that had ended Pop Wills' life, spun outward—away from the *Thunderbird*, away from the *Carefree*, end over end, driven by the fiery recoil of his own weapon. At a speed considerably less than the muzzle-velocity of the blast, but still much higher than the best speed of the feeble suit motor, Ron Carnavon spun into space. Out and away, the precious sapphires spilling out of his hand, glittering in the faint sunlight as they took up their orbits about him like tiny, mocking moonlets. . .

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The Conquistadors Come

by M. E. COUNSELMAN

The handsome, fair-haired Conquistadors were welcomed by the S'zetnurs with open arms—the grasping, grotesque arms of a lost race of beauty-worshippers.

THE CONQUISTADORS were tall men, tall and bronzed by many suns, and splendid as they strode down the gangplank in a seemingly endless

procession. They were fair-haired, with flashing black eyes like polished onyx, and their straight profiles might have been copied from the faces of the silver coins that

jingled in their pockets. In the steamy-hot atmosphere of the new-found planet, S'zetnu, they stripped to the waist almost at once, and their muscles rippled in the blue-green sunlight . . .

At the edge of the pallid forest surrounding the clear spot where the great rocket had landed, many eyes were watching their advent. Wondering eyes, wistful and excited eyes . . . but eyes that peered and squinted, rheumy with disease and almost blind.

The Conquistadors, after the manner of their ancient ancestors, knelt down in a ring, hands folded, heads bowed. One of them—the tallest, the most splendid—stood in the center of the circle and lifted both arms to the sky. His lips moved, and lovely rolling sounds issued from them . . .

The watchers in the forest gasped, looking at one another in silent wonder. Two centuries ago, their kind had lost the power of speech; and for a half century their deformed ears had been able to hear only the loudest of sounds—the screech of a giant beetle stalking them through the swampland, the crash of thunder, the rumble of a waterfall . . . the sound of this great rocket-ship roaring down upon them out of nowhere. Now, holding little seashells to their ears to amplify the voice of the Tall One, they began to jump up and down ecstatically, like children promised a treat. They nodded. They hugged one another with their short deformed arms, bumping their foreheads together in the ancient gesture of happiness and good will.

The Conquistadors stood up. The leader raised his hand—and suddenly, from all their open mouths, came beautiful noises that made the listeners in the forest shiver with pleasure. It was a strange thing, a magic thing! Cocking their hideous little heads this way and that, and holding the shells to their ears, they began to sway in cadence, mesmerized with delight; for not even their Elders could remember *singing*.

The lovely sounds ended. Then the Leader, the tall splendid one with the pleasant expression, held up his hand again and spoke, pointing first at one group of men, then at another, who nodded and drifted away from the ring toward the task he had set for them. The watchers in the forest nudged one another, pointing with their

stumps of hands and conversing (in the only way that was left to them) with the expressions that flitted across their horribly disfigured faces. *Hands!* they commented excitedly. *With fingers! And feet, gracefully arched feet, with five toes on each! Oh, were not the strangers beautiful—were they not perfect?*

However—the watchers frowned—they did not seem to be too intelligent. Now, with evident excitement, one of them came running to the tall leader with a handful of pebbles. Others gathered about the two of them, yelling and pounding one another on the back as they examined the small stones—which, the watchers knew, were completely worthless. No one, not even these strong healthy newcomers, could eat a *stone*.

"ROB! Yah-hoo . . .!" Harris, first astrogator, was yelling at his longtime buddy, the pilot and captain of the space-freighter Eroica. "Look at this stuff! Just look at it! Solaranium vein a foot thick . . . damn planet's loaded with it! *We did it! We finally did it . . .*"

"Well, don't burn out your jet!" Rob Cantrell chuckled, calm and laconic in the face of this near miracle. He squinted at one mica-bright stone, tossing it up and catching it with a grin of quiet triumph. "Yep . . . journey's end. If our rations hold out, we can mine and refine enough pure sola to start every factory on Terra booming again inside six months. I . . . *Good Lord!*" He broke off, hand arcing to the blaster on his hip. "What's *that* thing? *Heads up!*" he shouted a warning to the busy men about him. "*General alert! . . . we've got visitors!*"

It was a S'zetnur child who had ventured out of hiding, drawn by curiosity—and by the tantalizing smell that issued from a pot of stew one of the cooks was stirring. Now, as the tiny gargoyle-figure crawled out into the clearing from the shelter of those white-leaved trees, everyone turned to stare—the mechanics, unloading their diggers and refining filters; the freight crew, setting up the tents around the big rocket; the biochemists, busily testing the flora for edibility or possible toxicity; the ethnologists, searching for some clue to the language and customs of the people of this planet.

Cantrell, his hand dropping slowly from

his gun-butt, walked slowly forward toward the crawling child. It squinted up at him with milky blue eyes that could scarcely make out the outline of his tall figure. But, at his approach, it cowered back; started to scuttle for cover. Cantrell reached down gently and picked it up, shuddering at the little face so close to his own. Moonstone eyes. Gargoyle mouth with crumbling teeth. Round scabrous head that was almost hairless. Stumps of feet and hands that had no fingers, no toes. The child squirmed frantically in his embrace, uttering a small shrill whistle that seemed to be the only sound it could make.

"God, it's *human*, isn't it?" Harris, standing beside him, muttered in pity and revulsion. "Put it down, Rob! It's . . . diseased!"

More of the men from Terra crowded closer, peering at the struggling child. Then one of the chemists shouted, pointing. Cantrell whirled, hand moving again toward his gun.

Another of the creatures was creeping out of the forest. A woman—probably the child's mother. She limped forward, whistling soothingly to the child, but utterly terrified herself from the look on her bloated, twisted features. A few feet away from Cantrell, she threw her hands over her face and flung herself prone before him; head in the grass, she crawled toward him, reached his feet, and lay tense as though expecting a blow . . .

"Poor slob! God, I've seen beggars on Terra who weren't as . . ." Captain Rob Cantrell knelt slowly and set the child on its deformed feet. It toppled over at once, unable to stand, and the mother snatched it to her flat breast. She began to crawl again, dragging the child and backing away with her face still thrust into the spongy ground.

"Poor ugly slob . . . thinks we're going to hurt her, doesn't she?"

On impulse, Cantrell strode forward, took her arm gently, and lifted her to her feet. She swayed, clinging to the child. Casting about for some gesture of friendship, he suddenly unstrapped the space-watch from his left wrist and, smiling, buckled it about the woman's scrawny handless arm. She stared at it dumbly, milk-blue eyes darting

from the jeweled band to Cantrell's face for a moment. Then, with a little bleating sound, she threw herself at his feet again, trembling with terror. She lay there, clutching her baby and sobbing uncontrollably.

"Well, I'll be a—!" Cantrell glanced helplessly at Harris, "What d'you make of *that*?"

"Doesn't understand about presents," the astrogator guessed. "Must mean something special on this planet . . . Hey! Here come some more!"

HE POINTED toward the pale forest, from which a wary group of perhaps fourteen S'zetnurs, men and women, had emerged fearfully. Their hands—if they could be called hands—were flung up, like the woman's to cover their faces—if they could be called faces. And when they reached a distance of five yards from the silent group of Earthmen, all threw themselves down flat, their heads burrowing into the spiky grass.

"Don't get it," Rob Cantrell drawled, hands on hips, legs spread apart as he stood regarding this strange welcome. "Look; all of them are deformed. Inbreeding, do you suppose? Or some kind of plague . . .?"

"Sir, I believe it's a matter of vitamin deficiency," one of the bio-chemists spoke up from the group of Earthmen behind Harris. "I've been testing a few specimens under the micro. These white leaves—and look at that grass! It's the sunlight, I think. Not a bit of nutriment in the soil. Another thing," he pointed out shrewdly; "has anybody seen any animal-life yet? Ask me, I don't think there is any! These poor critters are just *starving* to death! Malnutrition. Years and years of it . . ."

Cantrell scowled, his lips pursed; he said slowly, "You know, Jim, I believe you're right . . . Well, *hell*!" He gestured impatiently to one of the cooks who had wandered over to join the curious group. "Break out some solid chow for these . . . people. On the double!"

"Yes sir!"

Grinning with the sheer pleasure of filling a need, several of the crew followed the cook. They came back with folding plates and collapsible cups, filled to the brim with succulent stew made of dehydrated vegeta-

bles and pressed beef. These, a bit squeamishly, they put into the clumsy grasp of the little dwarfed S'zetnurs; laughing, they watched how they snatched it, turning their backs to their benefactors as they wolfed down the warm food . . .

The laughter died. For almost instantly three, then a dozen of the dwarfish creatures were doubled up with nausea and stomach-cramp. Others, gagging at the first bite, dropped their platters of food. Then all threw themselves down before the men from Terra, groveling in the grass at their feet as though begging for mercy . . .

"Lord, we're *stupid!*" Cantrell sighed. "Of *course* they can't take our rich food! Probably been living on herbs and stuff for Lord knows how long . . ." He moved pityingly toward one groaning dwarf, writhing on the sward and hugging his stomach. "Hey, you medics! Give me hand—"

He knelt, trying to roll the sufferer over on his back and slip a gastrotub between the writhing lips. But, with a look of terrified pleading, the little S'zetnur covered his face and flopped over again, hiding his warped features in a clump of pale weeds. With his fingerless hands he groped along the ground, found Cantrell's foot, and drew himself up to it, wriggling in worm-like obeisance—

Then, before the Earth pilot could move, a swollen tongue crept out and caressed his bare toes under the plastic sandal-strap.

Cantrell's reaction was instinctive. His foot came up, in sheer disgust that any man should lick another's foot like a mongrel-dog. Cursing, he kicked the little S'zetnur square in the mouth.

And, the next instant, hated himself.

BLOOD, a thin watery trickle, ran from a corner of the gargoyle mouth; but the S'zetnur made no move to escape. He merely lay where he was, dumbly, holding up one arm. Opaque eyes peered warily up through the weeds.

"Ah . . . to hell with it!" the pilot burst out, furious with himself. He started to kneel and apologize; saw the futility of it, and turned away abruptly, striding toward the long silver ship. "Get these screwballs out of the way!" he snapped, irritable in his shame. "We've got work to do! We'll have to refine this sola on a night-and-day

shift! No rest for anybody . . . and twenty shocks to any of you jet-monkeys I catch trying to go over the hill! You got that?"

"Yes sir!"

"Yes-sir, Cap'n!"

"Yousa! I hears you talkin'!" This from Harris, who had strolled after him, checking over his charts carefully for the return flight.

Cantrell glared at him. "And that goes for you, too—Romeo!" he growled. "No fraternizing with the natives!"

"*Fraternize!* With *those* women?" Harris shuddered, thumbs in the studded belt of his spacesuit. "Listen, I'd have to be drunker'n I've ever been on Mars or Venus!" He broke off, looking at his friend with faint reproach. "You shouldn't have kicked that poor slob, though. Section 382-XV: *No overt act of violence unless to repel attack . . .* you read your Handbook lately, chum?"

Cantrell grunted, struck one fist into his other palm sheepishly. "I know it. I didn't mean to. But—licking my foot! But I'll make it up to him. Some way . . ."

"Sure!" Harris's eyes softened. Throwing an arm around Cantrell's shoulders, he locked step with him as they walked up the gangplank. "Easy enough. If it's a vitamin deficiency, like Jim says, why—it'll be a cinch for us to help these poor joes! We can ship chemicals from Terra, every return-trip. Teach 'em to grow food by hydro-vat methods. We could make a new world for them!"

The pilot nodded eagerly, his pleasant, alert face full of plans for those pitifully stunted creatures, now melting back into the pale jungle in obedience to the crewmen shooing them from the vicinity of dangerous—and valuable—machinery.

Cantrell grinned. "We can try vitamin therapy right away," he said happily. "Take, say, ten of the kids and feed them a test-diet for the forty days we're here, loading up sola. May take years of treatment to get them looking like *people* again, but—we can sure try!"

They glanced back over their shoulders in unison, two splendid young giants from another solar system, their eyes warm and bright with a thing called "brotherly love"—which it had taken their own small planet

many centuries to learn. Together they disappeared into the rocket ship.

Watching them from the white-leaved forest, the little people of S'zetnur turned away sadly, in shame and patient resignation. In a small clearing beyond sight of the bustling rocket-camp, they held council, communicating with sharp whistles and facial expressions.

Then—according to the ancient law which the Elders still recalled—they dragged forth the woman who wore The Mark on her wrist, the gleaming Band of Rejection which the Tall Leader of the beautiful ones had placed there with his own hand. The woman did not cry out when they bound her, and buried her, still breathing, beside a huge flowering tree—tossing the baby in with her, according to custom.

The man Rob Cantrell had kicked in the mouth, likewise, was made ready for the honor bestowed on him . . . and allowed to touch the *Icon*, as was his right . . .

THE BLUE-GREEN SUN sank slowly, and the night-shift of the Earthmen's work-camp took over, mining and refining solaranium ore, working swiftly and efficiently against time.

Cantrell and Harris slept on identical cots in a central tent, waking now and then to listen to the night-noises of this strange new planet, S'zetnu? . . . It was only a designation, not a name; a term in interstellar Esperanto, meaning "Seventh-from-the-Sun." Tomorrow, Cantrell thought sleepily, they would find out what the dwarfish inhabitants called their little world. It must have a name for they must once have had some sort of language. There were signs, the ethnologists reported, that they had once been a civilized people.

The pilot blew a smoke-ring at the damp ceiling of the tent, thinking and making plans.

"Harris?" he called softly. "You awake?"

"Uh-huh. Too damned hot to sleep! Worse than Venus. It isn't the—"

"—heat; it's the humidity!" Cantrell grinned in the darkness. "Yeah, yeah. Well, you can stand it for forty days, Say!" He sat up abruptly, snapping his fingers on sudden thought. "If we could hire a couple of those little S'zetnurs to locate sola veins

for us, we could cut down the time . . . put the Geiger crew on one of the spare refiners! Hire me one tomorrow, will you? A couple, I mean—two of the *older* ones, with rudimentary fingers and toes. They should know their way around better . . . Cripes! You can see how their race has deteriorated, each generation a little bit worse than the one before . . . the poor devils!"

"Yeah," Harris plucked Cantrell's cigarette-glow from the darkness to take a drag. "But we're going to fix all that for them! Vital food, in return for vital solaranium . . . Why, it's a natural for trade-relations between S'zetnu and Terra!" He blew out smoke, returned the cigarette. "El Presidente's sure to give each of us a citation—with bonus! I can just see my old lady spending it now. On a Martian vurna-fur coat! She's been whining for one ever since . . ."

Cantrell chuckled drowsily, then sighed. "I wish I hadn't kicked that little guy. Feel like a heel. Wish I hadn't given that woman my spacewatch, too, in a loose moment! What time is it?"

"88-zero, shiptime," the astrogator murmured. "Go to sleep, will ya? . . . I wish I was back on Tee with my baby tonight . . ."

Silence fell. Outside, the refiners chugged rhythmically, melting away the solaranium from the crude ore wheeled in by the miners. At a little distance from the camp, the Geiger experts were moving their counters over the ground, seeking the highly-fissionable ore. The sola shortage had shut down the industries of Terra for five years now, and sent many a rocket-ship out into space, searching, searching . . . until now, at last, the search was ended on a tiny planet Z-north of the System. Close! Near enough to organize a freight-lane!

But in the forest, the pallid forest beyond the camp, a gargoye-woman lay buried, clinging to her deformed half-idiot baby who had died with her. Cantrell's spacewatch glinted on her stumpy wrist; mute testimony that she must be *eliminated*, according to the ancient law that the Elders remembered. It was strangely unfair—for there were others, many others in the tribe, who were far more hideous than she! Mitka, who had only a hole for a nose, and Jura, whose ears were unformed knobs on either side of her head . . . but that, of course, was for the

Beautiful Ones to judge. Their word had always been the Law . . .

AROUND NOON the next day, Harris reported glumly to the central tent. Cantrell, hard at work on a sheaf of forms, glanced up, his eyes preoccupied.

"Harris? Did you get those guides?"

Harris spread his hands. "No can find! I've had men out combing the forest all day. Can't find a sign of those little pixies! They've just vanished!"

Cantrell grinned. "Well, they're back again . . . look; what do you think *that* is? A mirage?" He jerked a nod at a dwarfish figure coming across the clearing, trailing a long train of lush tropical flowers that had been woven into a sort of cape. A garland of the same flowers perched askew atop the scabrous gargoyle-head. The man limped proudly, presenting himself before Cantrell with a little bow.

"Well!" The pilot's eyebrows went up. "Who's he, the chief?" Then he saw the man's swollen lips. "Say . . . this is the poor jerk I *kicked*!" His face softened, and he pointed to a folding chair beside his cluttered desk. "Sit down, buster. You're hired—if I can only explain your job to you!"

Instead, quivering, the stunted S'zetnur covered his face and threw himself down on his face.

Harris sighed. "Here we go again!" He knelt and pulled the malformed dwarf to his feet and shoved him into a chair.

"Now," Cantrell groaned, "comes the tough part. How can I say in sign-lingo that we want him to locate *sola* veins for us? Well—here goes!"

He held up a piece of ore, pointing and gesturing. The dwarf eyed it, bewildered, milky-blue eyes darting from Harris to Cantrell and back again. Cantrell pointed to the earth—

Instantly the little S'zetnur threw himself flat on the ground again, quivering. He began to sob, holding up one stumpy arm.

"Oh, *bell*!" The spaceship's captain gave up, looking helplessly at his astrogator. "Harris? Can you—"

Harris pulled the S'zetnur to his feet again; shoved him into the chair; explained with patient gestures about *digging*, about *the ore*, about *the ship*. The man's eyes, like

glowing moonstones, followed his every motion eagerly, as a stupid child's might. He took the pebble in his hand obediently, went out to the ship, dug a small hole in the shadow of the great rocket, and buried the piece of ore. Then he looked up at Cantrell, towering over him in exasperation. Harris mopped his forehead.

"I give up!" he laughed. It's . . . it's as though there was a *glass wall* between us! We can see each other, and hear each other. But I can't make him *understand*. Damned if I understand him, either!"

Rob Cantrell rubbed his jaw, caressing his stubble of blond beard.

"If we only knew what's going on in that funny little head," he muttered. "What do they *want*? Everybody wants something. If we could just figure out what these S'zetnurs are after—besides centuries of decent diet, which they obviously need—we could—"

He glared at the twisted little S'zetnur, decked with flowers that made his hideous deformity even more noticeable. The man cringed at his expression, covering his face and peeping through his short arms. Then, emboldened, catching one of the pilot's hands between his own stumps, he examined it admiringly, tracing each finger with his gaze. Cantrell scowled and jerked his hand away impatiently.

The S'zetnur covered his face and threw himself flat on the ground. Cantrell cursed and mopped his streaming forehead and neck.

"I don't get it," Harris said, scratching his head. "I just don't get it . . . hey! Maybe if we take him out to that valley a mile from camp, we can put over the idea of his locating more *sola* for us. When he sees our men mining the stuff—"

"Sound idea," Cantrell grunted. "Come on!"

SUPPORTING the stumbling dwarf between them, the two Earthmen strode across the camp and down the long hill toward the distant sound of the pick-and-shovel crew. Two small a. g. barges sailed past them on their way down, loaded with ore and manned by a single sweat-streaked miner, headed for the nearest refinery.

As they neared the valley, where last night the Geiger crew had located a rich streak of

solaranium, the pilot and the astrôgator noticed that their small captive was growing very nervous. Stumbling along between them as fast as his stumpy feet could walk, he glanced first at Harris, then at Cantrell, his expressive features working with agitation.

When they reached a small ravine, its cliff-like walls pitted with many small caves, the little dwarf began to bleat and squirm in their grasp like a hysterical child being dragged to the dentist. Over his flower-decked head, the two Earthmen looked at each other, and shrugged.

"Now what?" Cantrell drawled. "This valley taboo or something, you suppose?"

"Beats me!"

Harris stopped, pulling the little S'zetnur around and pointing to a broad streak of sola inside the mouth of one cave. He made digging motions. He pointed to himself and Cantrell, beaming and nodding.

"Rock," he labored. "Nicee rockee! Find for us? . . . Oh hell!" He laughed at his own absurd pidgin-English, then resorted to gestures again. He pointed to the cave, to the little dwarf, to Cantrell—

The S'zetnur shook his head violently, clapping both stunted hands over his face. An agonized bleat issued from his twisted larynx, and he threw himself flat before Cantrell, groveling and holding up one arm—then, as the captain took an idle step toward the cave, he flung his tiny malformed body before the entrance, shaking his head and beating himself in the face with his fingerless hands.

Cantrell looked at Harris, who scratched his head, grinning.

"Beats me!" he repeated helplessly. "Guess they don't want us to have the sola—I!" his eyes hardened slowly. "Yeah—maybe that's it! Maybe they're—" He stiffened, glancing nervously toward the white jungle that pressed closely about them on all sides. "*Maybe they're arming right now—planning an attack—*"

Rob Cantrell's pleasant face changed. Eyes narrowed, mouth tight, he let his gaze flicker over the working men who were under his command, dependent on his judgment for their safety. His gaze returned to the small S'zetnur, feebly trying to block the entrance to that natural hole in the cliff's side. Or . . . was it a natural hole? Cantrell's

keen eyes became observant, noting worn places in the rock—

"There's something in this cave," Harris grunted. "Something this little monkey doesn't want us to see . . . a secret weapon, maybe? Sa-ay!" His pleasant face hardened, like Cantrell's. "Maybe these cookies aren't as dumb and helpless as they look! Maybe they've got something that could wipe out our whole expedition!"

Cantrell nodded and strode forward, jerking the bleating dwarf aside with one sweep of his muscular arm. The cave was not deep; and, Cantrell noted with tensed nerves, there were fresh flower-petals on the floor of the small opening. Petals like those on the flower-wreath of this fantastically decorated little S'zetnur.

The captain groped inside. Harris stepped forward, shoving the dwarf away as he flung himself at Cantrell again like a furious kitten. There was, the Earthmen both saw at once, something inside. A kind of box, crudely made of white wood, as though a clumsy child had put it together. There was no lock. Cantrell raised the lid—

Inside, dry and crumbling, was a small doll made of brown clay. Harris and Cantrell stared at it, amazed at its perfection of modeling. It was, or seemed to be, a very good image of an Earthman. Certainly, it was not intended to portray one of the stunted little S'zetnurs, for the legs and feet were perfect, the hands beautifully formed, the facial details fine and delicate—though there was about the thing, Cantrell noted, an odd expression of cruelty and arrogance—

"Well! What d'ya know?" he snapped. "A graven image! The aborigines on Terra used to make these images of an enemy—just before slipping him a poison-dart in the back! Juju . . . and they made sure it worked!"

He whirled on the little S'zetnur, who was whistling shrilly now, jumping up and down in agitated protest.

At that moment, one of the diggers shouted a warning. Cantrell turned, to see beyond the handful of workers in the valley a small army of S'zetnurs advancing on them from the jungle-edge. Backs to the cliff wall, Harris and Cantrell snatched out their blasters. The captain yelled, warning

the unarmed workers to make a dash for the camp:

"General alert! Prepare for attack!"

THEN the dwarfs were upon them, armed rather pathetically with clubs strapped to their fingerless hands. Advancing in a rough semi-circle upon Cantrell and Harris, and completely ignoring the half-dozen workers who dashed past them, the little S'zetnurs closed in. Lips tight, eyes narrowed, the Earthmen waited until they were within ten feet—

Then, methodically, they let go with their blasters, searing the attackers from left to right.

Screaming, they went down, half-charred bodies and burning hair. One little creature, luckier or bolder than the rest, struck a blow that numbed Harris's left arm. Cantrell blazed away at him. He fell, an unrecognizable mass of ashes.

The men from Terra pressed against the cliff wall, panting, their eyes raking the pale jungle for the next wave of attackers.

"How d'you like these babies?" Cantrell snarled. "Planning to jump us all the time—And we were feeling sorry for them!"

They waited, tensed for the next attack. In the distance they could hear the siren on the spaceship, calling a general alert. Calling in the Geiger crews, and the diggers, and the ethnologists. *Natives hostile, natives hostile!* the signal was screaming—

Cantrell turned his head briefly—and stiffened as he saw the small S'zetnur decked in flowers. He was still alive, crouched just inside the cave, clutching the mud doll and whimpering softly. The captain glared at him, hard-eyed.

"Ambassador, huh?" He smiled without mirth. "To keep us from being suspicious of this juju-attack, until it was too late!" He jerked his head at Harris. "Blast him! He's a spy, isn't he? Been all over the camp. Knows just where everything's located—"

The astrogator peered at the huddled creature nursing the doll. He raised his gun, then swallowed hard. "Rob—I can't do it! Cold like this, I mean . . . can't we take him prisoner? A hostage?"

Cantrell glanced at him, then at the pitiful figure in the cave.

"Don't be a damned fool!" he snapped.

"If he gets away and brings reinforcements, none of us'll get off this apple alive! You lost your guts or something?"

Harris scuffed his toe, looking down. "No-o . . . It's just that . . . Well, hell!" his gruff voice cracked. "He's so . . . helpless!"

"Helpless, my eye!" Rob Cantrell growled. "There may be thousands of these joes, closing in on us right now from that jungle! Millions! All right, I'm in command," he said quietly. "Make a run for the camp. I . . . I'll do it . . ."

His buddy tossed him a grateful look, born of their long-time friendship. With another look at the silent wall of forest, he sprinted in the direction of the camp. Once he paused, wincing, as the blare of a ray-gun sounded behind him. Then Cantrell caught up with him, his eyes pained, his lips white.

"Poor slob!" he muttered through clenched teeth as he ran. "Poor ugly little slob . . . He kept shielding that damn doll with his body!"

They burst into the clearing, where the lieutenants were already rounding up those of the ship's crew who were trained to fight. Others, the workmen and the experts, were piling into the ship for safety. The siren kept up its woman-like screaming: *Hostile natives, hostile!*

Cantrell and Harris stopped in the center of the clearing, to view the ordered shambles with sick eyes. They glanced at each other, and shrugged.

"All right!" the captain's clear voice rang out. "Prepare to take off! Repeating: Prepare to take off! Abandon all equipment not vital to crew. Repeating . . ."

The men from Terra were efficient men, quick, intelligent, and well-organized under the pilot and astrogator who commanded their expedition. In exactly 8-3 kilos, ship-time, men and machinery were loaded aboard the big silver rocket. Fire belched from her twin jets. She took the atmosphere of the planet designated as S'zetnur like a pale streak of flame. In another kilo, she was bulleting into free flight.

Cantrell, the pilot, fixed her automatic on "Sol-Terra," then strolled back to the chart room, where Harris was re-checking their line of flight. He sat down on

he plastine desk, lighting a cigarette. Harris took it from him, inhaled a deep drag, and handed it back. They looked at each other, smiling wryly.

"Well . . ." Rob Cantrell sighed. "There goes that presidential citation you were yapping about—with bonus. We'll be lucky if we keep our rating!"

"Oh, it won't be that bad," Harris predicted cheerfully. "I mean, nobody could expect us to form a trade-alliance with a bunch of hot-heads like that! Graven images! Tricked-up spies!" He spat disgustedly. "And all because we wanted one shipload of lousy sola . . .!"

Cantrell nodded bitterly. "And we could have done so much for them in return. A new world, I think you said . . .!" He emitted a short laugh, edged with cynicism. "Well . . . Terra-Government can't afford to ship from a hostile planet. Too damn expensive. We'll just have to equip another expedition and start looking again . . ."

Harris nodded absently, his eyes thoughtful. "Uh-huh . . . But if we could only have understood those little monkeys! Maybe they didn't mind our taking the sola. Maybe it was something else . . . Rob," he blurted, "one of the junior ethnologists has a theory; did you hear? He . . ."

"Junior ethnologists have always got a theory!" the captain snorted. "Lack of experience!"

"Yeah, but . . ." Harris pursued. "This kid says he thinks those little S'zetnurs were

a cult of beauty-worshippers. You know? Like they used to have on Venus? Eugeniac mating—killing off the imperfect ones. He says they just don't understand about nutrition; that's why it's so tragic that they're all deformed and diseased now. None of them are beauties any more, and they don't know why. But when they saw us . . ."

"Nuts!" said Cantrell rudely.

"Yeah, but . . . The doll. Maybe it was an image of the way *they* used to be. A sort of pattern for them to remember . . . And you know how that poor joe kept . . . *looking* at us? The one all tricked up in flowers? This ethno thinks they sent him to be mated with one of our women . . ."

"Good God!" the pilot laughed.

". . . and that poor slob of a woman, who acted so upset when you strapped your spacewatch around her wrist. The kid thinks you marked her for death, and . . ."

"Oh, go soak your head! And that junior ethnologist's, too!" Cantrell chuckled. "I understood those babies, all right! They're just a bunch of greedy, ignorant morons, who were determined not to let a shipful of strangers cart off any of their lousy little planet! You and your . . . glass wall!"

He punched Harris on the shoulder in affectionate scorn. The astrogator grinned feebly; then with more assurance, because Cantrell was his friend and he trusted his judgment.

"Yeah . . ." he said. "Yeah, Rob; I guess you're right . . ."

TWO COMPLETE

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ON SALE OCT. 1st





The PIT of NYMPTHONS

by STANLEY MULLEN

Locked in the mutant jungle of Venus were the horror-secrets of the universe. Here, into these thousand deaths, with a Tihar-trotting convict to lead her, went luxury-soft Kial Nasron.

HAILARD, director of Venusian Exports, was not given to unnecessary elaborations or complexities of speech. He let his attention stray from the girl to a tiny scale-model of the first rocket ship to land on Venus, and reflected bitterly that after two hundred years the planet still held both problems and eery mysteries for the Earth colonists.

"But a convict," Kial Nasron protested.

She was the daughter of Torkeg Nasron, Martian politician and the largest single shareholder in VE. As such she felt entitled to make a nuisance of herself. However, she did have a tragic problem.

Hailard sighed. "A man without deviltry in him has little capacity for wisdom, or sainthood either. Convict or not, Craig Alston is the man for your job."

The sharp sound of her indrawn breath

puzzled Hailard. "I didn't know you knew him."

Kial shrugged. "I don't, personally. I've never seen him, though I know the name and remember something about the case. But we were talking about an expedition into the Tihar Forest to look for my sister."

Hailard studied her critically. "Yes, we were. But you don't really want my advice, and I doubt if you'll like it. Your request puts me in an awkward position."

"Be specific." Her expression was that of a woman used to having her own way. It reminded him of her father, and he had uneasy conviction that the interview was going to be difficult.

"All right, I will be. You don't understand Venus. If you were familiar with conditions here, you wouldn't need descriptions or explanations. This is a strange, savage planet, and the Tihar Forest is the most vicious part of it."

The girl stopped him scornfully. "But surely a well-equipped expedition . . ."

Hailard smiled. "There's no such thing as far as the Tihar Forest is concerned. After forty years on Venus I still know nothing about the interior. Nor does anyone else. The forests here are freaks. Ages ago, atomic holocaust got out of hand. In a few places certain forms of life survived. Nature went mad. The Tihar Forest is its laboratory of gibbering, unnatural experiments—half a million square miles of luxuriant, nightmarish wonderland. Not one living creature, plant or animal, is the product of sane, orderly evolution. Its an asylum for the cripples, freaks and lunatic-fringe of abnormal creation."

Hailard went on in his clear way. They claimed that once he had studied for the ministry. He had convictions and he knew what he was talking about.

"True, Venusian Exports holds a license for limited exploitation of its peculiar resources. But we nibble at the edges. We collect rare furs and leathers, some valuable hardwoods and minerals, but we don't even try to penetrate the forest depths, or develop any plantations there. Its too dangerous. There have been some hideously disturbing rumors recently, and a marked increase of casualties . . ."

"My sister is there," Kial Nasron said

stubbornly. "In this place of horror you describe. As long as we thought she had died in the crash of the *Krajulla*, we accepted the tragedy. But now that we have evidence she may be alive, neither my father nor I will rest until we locate the wreckage. She may be hurt or lost or a captive of savage natives. The Company assured us you would give us every possible aid in finding and rescuing her."

Hailard nodded wearily. "I have orders from the executive board to put all resources at your disposal. Our staff will give you every technical assistance, and a fast survey cruiser has been adapted for low-altitude scouting. I disapprove of the expedition, particularly of you or your father going along. It will be hard enough, and you are both rash, headstrong and inexperienced. And there'll be difficulty arranging for a crew."

"I don't understand. Aren't the men convicts?"

Hailard spoke angrily. "Convicts, yes—but not animals to be ordered around. They're paroled to the Company in my custody. I'm responsible, and I won't order anyone to take such risks. Your project is insane. If your sister is alive, after three months in the Tihar no one can help her and you probably couldn't recognize her. It would be cruel to bring her back. If she's dead, that's the best thing that could happen to her. Forget her. If she were my own daughter, my advice would be the same."

Kial Nasron was shocked. "You mean you won't help?"

"I didn't say that. I'll ask for volunteers. Your father's influence will help. If you're both determined to go, I can't stop you. In any case, you'll need Alston. He's just returned from Tihar and he knows more about it than anyone else. I'm waiting for his report. You can catch him at psycho, if you like. He'll be through soon."

She moved toward the door. "If I miss him there, I'll be back," she promised. "How'll I know him?"

"Ask anyone. Alston is well-known. But don't promise anything you can't make good. He's the most dangerous man on Venus."

"I believe you're afraid of him," Kial Nasron said, pausing at the door.

"I am," admitted Hailard.

THE cubicle was small, stifling hot in spite of air-conditioning. Alston remembered groping to a chair and sagging into it. Armrests came together like clamps, enforcing physical immobility. Men had been known to go mad in the psycho-laboratories, and such precaution was necessary. Invisible robot arms reached out to fit the plastic helmet tightly on his head. Other clamps and electrodes gripped wrists and ankle with inhumanly icy precision of contact.

There was always momentary impulse to resist, physically and mentally. One strained against the manacles and tried to darken brain horizons, both useless effort. But for a muted humming of tubes, the place was soundless. Lightless, save for the brief swirls of flaring color on the audio-screen. An illusion of infinite space built around him. Tension released suddenly. Involuntarily, Alston relaxed, became dreamily aware of the metallic voice of the machine starting its ritual of questions.

"Who are you?"

Alston responded with name and number.

"How long have you been on Venus?"

"Why were you sentenced?"

"How long does it usually take you to recuperate from the prescribed two months of timber-cruising?"

"Can you explain why your present venture was prolonged so far beyond the legal limit for exposure?"

Alston could and did. It was an elaborate lie, but he did not even remember that he lied. He was conscious that something was wrong with himself and his memories, but the false structure of his recent adventures and emotions flowed from his subconscious without wavering. Desperately he tried to erase all dangerous recollection from his mind. But his conscious mind was alert, wary, attempting by plausible lies, evasions and half-truths to defeat the purpose of the examination.

Detection was certain, sooner or later. The machine would realize the artificial nature of his memory blocks and trace them to their source. A battery of electronic brains has more efficiency than emotion. Even primed as he was by a visit to the outlawed

auto-hypnotic devices hidden in the old native quarter of Castarona, there was no real chance of deceiving the robot brains. He did not expect that, but he did hope to confuse the issue long enough, cause enough delay, to give him his one chance of escape. His plan was carefully worked out. Not foolproof, but a matter of extremely delicate timing. It could work. But now . . .

By a supreme effort, he tried to banish all thought of escape from his thought-patterns, tried to smudge-out the record of all recent emotion, tried to forget everything that had happened to him in the Tihar Forest. Especially . . .

At first Alston answered in words, speaking aloud from habit. Vocal response was not required, meant nothing to the machine. The sounds were noted and filed for future reference. Precise brain-wave pattern measurements and analysis of psychological reactions combined into far more exact information about him than any word or thought formed consciously by the subject. The robot psychograph was lie detector, cephalograph, and electronic calculator. Its prying fingers reached into the human soul and came forth with stark truth.

Sharp, incisive, implacable, the psychograph probed with its mechanical voice. Alston responded, his mind dulling, drifting on the vagaries of memory stream, lulled by the drone of heating tubes, the rustling hiss of his own breathing, the click of relays. Naked danger lay in this state for Alston, yet he dared not brace himself against the questioning. Synthetic memories would serve better if he yielded to his subconscious. His voice descended to wordless mumbling, then died away in cushioned silence.

Above all, no thought of escape, of dying or disappearance.

Alston was no different from other men, except for the dogtag. He was cast in the same mold of common humanity, but the identification dogtag fastened on an impervium wire round his neck made the difference.

A man with the VE convict dogtag broadcasting its invisible and inaudible signal cannot escape, cannot merely disappear. At any time, wherever he was, its signal could be tuned in and his exact position located.

If the tag were forcibly removed by breaking the wire, almost an impossibility with impervium, the signal automatically became an alarm to summon patrol fliers from Castarona or Quanta City. The escapee would be picked up within a radius of five miles from the start of his break.

THE field staff of Venusian Exports were a tough, hard-bitten, reckless crew, consisting largely of convict labor recruited from Luna Prison or the mines of Callisto. After serving part of their terms, they were permitted to volunteer and be paroled in custody of the company. In most cases, it was an escape from the frying pan into the fire. One year in the deep mines and five years on Venus in constant danger and under intolerable living conditions, Alston had developed certain facets of his remarkable personality at the expense of social instincts which seemed of no further use to him.

Guilty or innocent, he had been sentenced and he was there. The abstract justice involved no longer mattered. He was vague about details that seemed several lifetimes ago, and six years of nursing a cumulative hatred of mankind had made him as wary, cunning and treacherous as any other wild beast.

The fact that his cage occupied over a million square miles of the northern hemisphere of Venus merely irritated him with the illusion of freedom. For a man serving an indeterminate sentence, legal release ceases to be even a vague dream. Except by death, few convict laborers left the company, legally or otherwise. The escape to actual outlawry might be another illusion, but Alston had worked out a plan which seemed a fair gamble. It hinged on three facts not known by the company, the most important of which was discovered by him on his recent expedition. And it began with his death, or with a reasonably exact facsimile of it. . . .

Always supposing that the psychograph examination did not nip his plan in the bud. An hour or two would be the most he could hope for, but it might be enough.

Among other fantastic mutant plants of the Tihar Forest is a giant-sized pitcher-plant, or fly-killer. From its aromatic juices

can be distilled a drug causing artificial catalepsy. Under proper dosage, the condition simulates death so convincingly as to defy medical detection. A microscopic overdose results in violent convulsions or actual death. But the real joker, as far as Alston was concerned, lay in the brevity of the cataleptic effect. Timing would be deadly important. His death must occur far enough from the incinerators to guarantee recovery before his body was burned; yet close enough so that his dogtag could be removed and sent to the central records office before his dreadful awakening.

Afterward, it might be rough, and someone was very likely to get hurt. But with careful timing there was an excellent chance that he would get free minus the tag, and be well on his way to the Tihar Forest before his deception was discovered.

A harsh burr of sound from the screen roused him. The psycho test was over. There was no indication of findings. He slumped in the chair while the machine clicked and hummed and blinked signals. Invisible robot hands released the clamps and removed the helmet. Weak and strained, Alston had to be helped to his feet and guided gently to the door.

Outside, he blinked while his eyes adjusted to the lighted corridor. After the gloom of the cubicle, normal illumination was blinding.

The next two hours would tell the tale. He hoped the coming interview with Hailard would be brief. Every minute counted. . . .

II

THE girl had obviously been waiting in the lobby for Alston to come from psycho. She intercepted him purposefully, but with odd hesitation.

"You're Alston."

It was statement, not question. For a nasty moment Alston was afraid that she belonged to his blanked-out memories. Eyes like cloudy gray ice stopped him with a shock like recognition, and there was something familiar about her voice. The momentary hesitation was a clue that she was not sure of him, and everything but the eyes and voice was a stranger. Relief made him weak.

Six years ago she would have been too

young for his notice, and nothing since then could be important. She was tall, slender but shapely, with an angular face and creamy tan skin coloring no one ever gets on eternally overcast Venus. Honey-blonde hair draped bare shoulders in a long bob, and the expensive gown of turquoise metal-cloth molded her body as if sprayed on. It was cut scant enough to show a lot of her skin, and a length of nyloned leg which might have stirred biological impulses in a man with less on his mind.

"People usually just point at me," he observed bitterly. "Yes, I'm Alston."

Tourists were always startled by the apparent freedom of the convict parolees on Venus. But this was no staring, curious tourist. She was somebody's spoiled darling, and her manner of casual arrogance grated on him. Rising irritation made him belligerent.

"Somebody just did, by request. I didn't want to miss you."

"All right," he snapped. "I'm one of the sights. Now that you've seen me, go away."

She stiffened, and the turquoise gown stiffened with her, but she deliberately ignored his rudeness. "Animals in cages don't interest me," she observed. "I'm Kial Nasron, if the name means anything to you."

Alston explored the temporarily limited range of his memory, drew blank. Until the hypnotic amnesia wore off, he was outclassed in guessing games. "Should it?" he asked cautiously.

"Perhaps not. Maybe it's better if you prefer to forget everything. Is there some place we can talk?"

Panic nagged Alston with the fleeting minutes. Just now any delay might be fatal to his plans. If he were nasty enough she might let him go. "Right here," he said viciously. "It's public enough so we won't run out of conversation too quickly."

She paled and sparks flickered in her eyes, but Kial Nasron controlled her anger and spoke swiftly. "Six years is not long enough for a man to forget my sister Anelle. They just don't. No matter. We'll talk about you. Director Hailard says you know more about the Tihar Forest than anyone else. He says you can help us, if you will. And I'm not asking favors for old times' sake. Whatever your personal feel-

ings may be, you've got to help us. We'll be very grateful. My father is more important now than he was before. He can do you a lot of good, and I know he'll do anything in his power."

Alston was cautious. "What is all this about?"

Her voice was low. "She was on her honeymoon. A passenger on the *Krajulla*. It was a luxury excursion liner which crashed on Venus three months ago, in case you've forgotten that too."

Memory jogged Alston. "I remember hearing of it."

"Search parties found scattered wreckage in the Tihar Forest. Landing was impossible, for some reason I don't understand, but low-flying helicopters examined the area thoroughly. There was no sign of life. It looked as if everyone on board was killed since even the wreckage was burned almost beyond recognition. Then recently some evidence has been found that suggests a few passengers may have survived, either lost in the wilds or prisoners of the natives. A native killed by a grull-cat hunter was wearing some jewelry we identified as my sister's. We believe that she's alive. Director Hailard says you know more about the Forest than any other living man. We want you to help find my sister."

Alston grunted. "Hailard knows better than that."

"He said you'd be difficult."

ALSTON shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean that. If he asks me to go, I haven't much choice. But the rescue party idea is insane. If there were survivors, they're dead now. It would take a large army to comb the Tihar, and even then, if the natives wanted to hide something, there are plenty of ratholes in the cities of the swamp area. You could never find anyone, except by accident. Aside from that, parts of the forest are deadly with radioactivity. You might not recognize your sister if you found her."

"But you will help us?" Kial Nasron pleaded.

Alston temporized. "I'll talk to Hailard." He brushed past the girl and reached the elevators.

A robot-attended elevator took him up.

Director Hailard's office was on one of the upper floors.

During the ascent, memory snapped back like a rubber band and flicked him viciously in the face. He turned sick and dizzy as six years unreeled backwards in his mind like a reversed reel of film. Memories of Annelle and her promises, her father and his glib treachery. The trial. His own indecision in the emergency, following orders until too late to save his shipmates.

The past faded from his mind, assumed its relation to present realities. For four years he had planned escape, schooling himself to bleak patience, disciplining himself into an automaton, so that he would execute the necessary motions blindly. Now was the time, his last chance. The Nasrons and their problems did not exist for him any more. Forget them. Nothing was changed. His margin was dangerously thin. See Hailard, quickly. Get it over. His fingers toyed with the tube of extract in his pocket. Then—

Hailard was busy on the visiphone as Alston knocked and entered. He nodded grimly. Alston settled himself in the victim's chair and waited. Evidently the report was not up from psycho.

The office was no different from a thousand others on Venus; decorated in tasteless, exotic luxury, it was meant to impress the important tourists or visiting Company officials. Alston was not impressed, but he liked the man enthroned like an idol behind a desk of chromium and magnificent Kru-leather. Older than he looked, the director had been a man of action, one of the real explorers of Venus after he had turned from the putty-soft civilization of Earth. Hailard clung to the reins of power and enjoyed contact with his dangerous charges. Alston half-sensed a secret sympathy for his own bleak anger.

Hailard rang off quickly and glowered at Alston. "That was Kial Nasron. She says you claim to have forgotten all connection with her family in the past. Is that correct?"

"That's what I told her," Alston fenced warily. "Sometimes a convict prefers to forget his past contacts. Besides, after four months in Tihar, a man is entitled to a convenient fit of amnesia."

Hailard classified and accepted the implied possibilities. "If you mean that it's

wiser to overlook remembered grudges, you may be right. I'm not sure her father will want your help. Kial was away at school when you got into trouble, and knew very little about it or you. Her father's memory may be longer. I didn't realize any connection until I checked your files, or I'd never have suggested you. Either way, you're still the only man for the job. If they ask for you, what will you do?"

"You're asking me?"

"You don't have to answer. I can't order you to go. Neither can Torkeg Nasron. I want you to know your rights, that's all."

Alston was painfully aware of passing time. In imagination he could see the gigantic robot calculators at work in the psychograph laboratory, adding up his brain-wave patterns and collating other evidence to a danger-red question mark.

"I'll decide after they've asked me," he said hurriedly. "Now do you want my report on Tihar?"

Hailard studied him shrewdly. "Forget it. Kial Nasron will be here in a couple of minutes. I'd better tell her more about you, in case she prefers to make other arrangements."

"Good," Alston laughed. "I need some rest. Four months in Tihar is too long. I've felt ill. Nearly passed out in the psycho room. . . ."

Then he was out the door and on his way to the elevators. It was now or never. The tube was in his fingers; a quick jab with the built-in hypo needle. His thumb pressed the plunger and the job was done. Forcing open the elevator door, he tossed the empty tube down the echoing shaft. A car was coming up, but it might not stop on this floor. It was essential that his body be discovered at once. Waves of whirling black nausea roared through him. His last conscious act was to smash an automatic thermocouple fire alarm.

The elevator door was opening. Kial Nasron stood framed against the interior of the car. Her mouth was open in a scream.

Alston's body crumpled suddenly. Light exploded into intolerable bright fragments in his brain. Darkness, endless, complete. . . .

Sharp awake, naked, covered with rough canvas, Alston lay on a slab. Conscious-

ness had returned suddenly. By instinct, fingers reached for his dogtag. It had been removed. His death had been accepted.

Bewildered, he evaluated his surroundings. This was not the vault for bodies consigned to the incinerator. Something had gone wrong.

Explanation came to him. His lips twisted in wry grimace. Of course, all bodies were tested for radioactivity, especially those of convicts who worked in the Tihar Forest. Prolonged exposure had caused pathological change in his body. Enough to arouse clinical curiosity. He had been brought to the dissecting laboratory. This was an unlooked for development. It complicated his escape plan.

It was a large, bare room. Around him were other slabs set on trestles, each occupied by a covered, shapeless form. At the far end, in an alcove were curious flickering lights. Patterns of movement resolved into figures cowed and draped in radiation proof armor. It was easy to guess at their tasks.

A figure moved toward him through the labyrinth of benches and slabs. At intervals the attendant paused over an uncovered body, extending a hand-sized radiation detector over the lump of cold flesh. After each test, the robed and hooded attendant made a notation in his notebook and marked the chart on each slab. In breathless strain, Alston watched the man's progress toward him.

From the alcove came the whine of an atomic bone-saw, nagging Alston's nerves.

The attendant was close. Alston's turn was next. Eyes closed, he lay still, taking one deep breath and holding it till his brain neared bursting. He sensed physical nearness. A shadow crossed his eyelids. The attendant bent above him, extending the detector. Its buzzer snarled angrily. Canvas rustled, was withdrawn.

Alston moved. His arm curved in one slashing arc. It was a trick blow learned in his space academy days. One swift slash with the edge of a hand could paralyze a man, stun him for hours. Alston caught the falling body and rolled with it to the tiles.

In silence he dragged the unconscious man under the slab and rapidly stripped off his robes. Swiftly, quietly, Alston donned

the radiation-proof garments. The body was hard to lift, but with a minimum of noise and bustle, he got it to the slab, replaced the canvas covering. For jewelled seconds, he waited to see if this disturbance had been noted from the alcove.

Steeling himself to patience, Alston pretended to continue the task of the attendant, working his way from slab to slab and slowly edging toward the swing doors at the end of the loft. It was a grueling, nerve-tightening process. At the last slab he paused, darting a quick survey at the activities within the far alcove. Attention there seemed to be focused upon an immense vat in which flickering lights played. Boldly, Alston stepped through the door.

From a small landing a spiral ramp descended. It was the one visible exit.

As he remembered, the clinical laboratories and dissecting rooms occupied the two top floors, beneath the landing stages on the roof of the VE Building. Apparently there was no direct outlet to the roof from this landing. He would have to risk a descent to the office-floors below. It was a long chance, garbed as he was, but there seemed no help for it. His robes and cowl might disguise him but they were sure to attract attention. He must get other clothes somehow before making his break.

His previous escape plan dealt with the underground tunnels connecting the various buildings. Now a new plan must be made up as he went along, grasping whatever opportunity arose. Probably the best trick would be to reach the roof-landings by elevator and try to steal a 'copter.

Down the ramp he went, abandoning stealth. The first landing he reached was empty, but seemed to open into laboratory rooms. Down again. The ramp opened into a corridor leading to a central landing. Alston tried to remember if Hailard's office were on the floor just under the lofts. At any rate, there were elevators here.

Pressing a stud, he waited for the whine of the car. One was ascending, but he could not guess how close it was.

Waiting, he pressed close against the wall, out of vision range of the opening door. A weapon would be a help, but he might as well wish for the moon.

A hiss of releasing air announced the ele-

vator cage. Silently the door opened, and a humanoid robot emerged. Blank but sensitive metallic eyes fixed on Alston.

SUDDENLY alarms rang through the echoing corridors. A blinker red signal flashed in the cage, its reflection a splash of blood on the polished frame. The robot hesitated, reaching for the portable transmitter to report below for instructions. Alston barked quick command. Half-turned, the robot touched the transmitter. Alston struck.

His fist crashed into the face plate, numbing his arms to the elbow. A jingle of small mechanical parts rained inside the robot, but the automaton caught at the man. Man and machine fell in a loud tangle, locked in savage, struggling embrace. Alston broke free and smashed in the face plate with a series of blows. His fingers clawed at intricacies of wiring inside. Acrid smoke and a smell of scorched insulation spiralled forth. The robot sprawled in weirdly human attitude of death.

No use now to descend. Hope of bypassing the guarded lower floors to the tunnels must be abandoned. And unarmed, he could not hope to get past the guards on the roof landings. The alarm was out.

Inside the cage, he jammed the controls on nonstop descent and sprang back to the landing. Forcing shut the safety door released the car for a shrieking express drop. Uncontrolled, it would crash into fearful wreckage at the tunnel levels.

It would confuse the search momentarily while the debris was examined for his body.

He looked quickly around the landing, found a tablet numbering the rooms and giving directions. He was on the floor of Hailard's office. It gave him an idea. Perhaps he could hold the director as hostage for his escape. At least it would be no worse than his present predicament. Hailard's office would be the last place they would expect him.

He hurried down the corridor.

Hailard's door was closed. Alston flung it open and leaped inside. Kial Nasron and the director faced each other across the desk. Both faces froze, staring at the intrusion. Hailard's hand dipped toward an open drawer.

In tigerish movement, Alston scooped

girl and chair from the floor and flung them over the desk into Hailard's lap. The heat gun flamed at random, melting a section of plastic wall. Alston sprang, went over the desk top into a belly-slide. All three of them crashed in a squirming heap on the floor.

Alston wrenched free first and came up with the heat gun in his hand. Pale and furious, Kial Nasron writhed back to the wall, glaring at the man. Hailard sat up, staring in dazed fixation at the pointing gun.

"It won't do you any good, Alston," he said. "Security police are searching the building."

"We'll see about that," Alston grinned at the girl. "Mr. Hailard and I are exchanging clothes."

After the exchange, Alston smashed the visiphone and inter-office communicator.

"The lady is leaving with me," he warned the director. "So use judgment. If anything happens to me, it happens to her. If anyone gets in my way, I'll blast through. Is that clear?"

Hailard nodded. "Clear to me. Maybe not to the guards on the roof."

Alston's face lighted savagely. "You can come along and explain it to them."

Herding his prisoners before him, Alston marched to the elevator-landing. Hailard pressed the stud for the surviving cage. The car stopped, its door slid open.

Alston gestured toward the transmitter. "Give them your orders and make it good."

Hailard shrugged. . . .

III

FIVE hours and approximately 1,800 airline miles from Quanta City, Alston switched back from rocket power to the atomic motors. Not daring to use radar for navigation or altitude soundings, he was not certain exactly where he was. Climbing swiftly into the murk, he flew blindly by dead reckoning, and most of the journey was accomplished in or above the miles-deep canopy of dust and vapor which eternally shrouds Venus from all view of other worlds.

On the silver, skimming over the limitless expanse of cloud banks, rainbow-tinted with reflected light, the ship had a view of breathtaking extent. They were somewhere over

the Tihar Forest, he knew, and within striking distance of his destination. But until he descended below the obscurity of unbroken mist-seas, the exact position was guesswork. Blades flailing in the thin, stratospheric air, the 'copter slanted downward, settling swiftly. It hovered for seconds above a roil surface of blinding brilliance, then churning grayness enveloped them, limiting vision to a few yards radius.

Temptation to use the sounding device was overwhelming, but he knew that hundreds of spotters were tuning detectors eagerly, hoping for just such a lapse, to triangulate his position. With muttered profanity, he restrained the impulse.

Sparing a moment from peering anxiously below, he eyed Kial Nasron resentfully.

"You should have 'chuted down when I gave you the chance," he told her morosely. "It was a better risk than this."

"I wanted to come," she replied, with a toss of head. "This is the Tihar Forest, isn't it?"

He grinned. "I think so. We'll know in a few minutes if the ceiling is high enough to give me a chance to pull this crate out of the fall. If not, I don't think we'll care."

"I'm an easy pick-up, but hard to shake. Since we're landing, you might untie my hands."

"And have you get foolish notions of grabbing the controls?"

"What good would that do me? I can't fly a 'copter."

Alston stared through the viewports. The ship appeared to be descending a well of infinite depth with featureless gray walls in which flickered eery light.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," he admitted. "I had a vague idea of turning you loose with the ship, later on, after I'd smashed the radar and wireless. How d'you expect to get back?"

"We'll figure that out when we come to it," the girl said confidently. "Maybe we can still make a deal. If we find my sister and take us both back, you'll have something to bargain with. My father will make them meet any terms you say."

Alston disillusioned her brutally. "Don't count on it, sister. I'm on a one-way ticket. The penalty for attempted escape is death,

in the disintegrators. I've added kidnapping, stealing a ship, and some assorted violence to my record. The least I'd get is life in the deep mines, and I'd prefer the disintegrators to that. You'll have to find yourself another hero."

Kial Nasron fell silent while Alston returned his attention to the controls. Dark rifts appeared in the grayness, became restless mobile patterns, like smoke swirling in a glass. The rotating blades overhead caught denser air and set up curious disturbance areas in the mist. Except for the lessened gravity, like the first moments in a rapidly descending elevator, there was no sense of motion at all. The ship might have been suspended in a dim, mist-shrouded pocket of space.

Tense at the controls, Alston did not turn as she spoke again.

"Perhaps, then, I can make contact with the searching parties, and bargain with them. You don't know my father's influence. He can protect you."

Alston grunted savagely. "No, thanks. I've had dealings with your father. Maybe you don't remember. You were just a kid, away at school on Earth. He helped railroad me. Figured I was not good enough for Annelle, and that was one way to be rid of me. As if I had a chance, anyhow. That was the joke. They called it sabotage, when the charge should have been negligence under extenuating circumstances. Annelle stood by and let him do it."

HE WAS conscious of her voice, but it sounded distant, unreal.

"Then you did remember. I didn't know much about it. You were a forbidden topic in the house. But you're wrong about Annelle. She cried a lot before she forgot, and even Father talked of having the case reopened. Nothing came of it. I supposed you were guilty."

"I was. There was a choice of following orders or saving the ship. I waited too long to decide. Men died. They were my friends. That was important, the rest isn't. You're welcome to both your father and your sister. I could even enjoy your predicament if I cared. But I'm past that, long ago. None of you even exist to me."

"Then you won't mind if I try to reach

the searching parties? They could take me back—"

He laughed grimly. "And have you lead them to me? I'd be a fool to trust you. Besides, none of them will get this far. None on the surface. And the air patrols can't land. You're stuck with me, sister. And don't expect any favors. I'm not in the mood."

Dark curtains parted suddenly below.

Immensity of somber desolation spread in all directions. The scene was savage, monstrous, rich in vegetation, fitfully lighted by distant volcanic flares. Jungle had stormed and over-run the visible countryside. Like a vast green map it unrolled below them. Directly beneath the plunging 'copter, and perilously close at hand, was a jagged up-thrust of bare rock, miles-high, towering almost into the gray ceiling of mist.

Frantically, Alston worked at the controls. Airscrews whined, shrilled, blasted. The muted thunder of atomic engines rose into deafening crescendo. The blades overhead vibrated in frenzy of rotation.

The 'copter pulled from its steep fall, jerked forward like a startled animal, then hesitated. One of the blades grazed the high pinnacle of rock with a jarring crash. The ship rebounded, poised like a dancer, then fell away, floundering in a crazy rhythm.

Fighting the wheel and stick, Alston was wrenched from his strapped pilot-seat and wedged violently among the control bars.

The damaged blade broke loose and beat itself to exploding tatters on the fuselage cabin. Gyrating, plunging end over end, the ship was tearing itself to pieces. Extricating himself, the man shut off the motors and switched to rocket power. Jets flamed and sputtered. Ground, like a solid green wall, rose up toward the stricken ship. Thundering jets painted a crazy pattern of brilliant crimson.

Righting the ship, Alston tried vainly to jettison the blades, but they were lodged fast in the keys: Banshee wail of tortured brace wires rose shrill and thin. In a sickening glide, the ship struck. By instinct, Alston cut the power. Then, darkness. . . .

Green, roaring avalanches engulfed the hurtling ship, wiped away the landing gear. Upper branches grasped at the breaking fuselage, ground at its metal plates with

tearing force. Twice it broke clear, bounded high in the air, and struck again. In a high tangle of treetops, it lodged for seconds, then toppled and fell a sheer hundred feet before coming to rest in a snarled webbing of vines and main limbs. Like a broken moth, twitching and swaying, it hung there.

A band of natives found the wreckage. Like agile monkeys they swarmed up the trees, found the occupants still unconscious, and lowered them gently to the forest floor. The native leader solved this problem with primitive directness. Taking a large mouthful of water from his snakeskin canteen, he blew hard, spraying Alston's face liberally, then repeating the process with the girl.

Water showering Alston jerked him instantly awake. Dazed and bruised, he raised himself on one elbow and looked about. It was impossible that he had survived the crash, but he seemed painfully alive. He sat up, blinking.

A group of fox-headed natives surrounded him, their large ears flapping excitedly. They waved spears and danced, chirping noisily, faceted eyes on stalks protruding from their foreheads writhing and flickering with curiosity and interest. Alston spoke to them in their own language of weird, chirping monosyllables.

KIAL NASRON was rousing. She showed less signs of battering than he did, but evidently her return to consciousness was not an unmixed blessing. Her cultured voice made unladylike comments.

Suddenly aware of the natives, Kial leaped to her feet and started running like a frightened *yarnab*. The native leader hurled a spear-shaft between her legs and brought her down heavily. His followers carried her back.

"What will they do to us?" she wailed, shuddering as she looked at the half-human creatures.

"Shut up," he ordered. "These are friends."

He addressed the leader and the chirping discussion went on. Partially reassured, the girl examined the eery beings with curiosity which they openly returned, picking at her garments, touching her skin, laughing among themselves and making comments which she could not understand.

Vaguely manlike in form, the inhabitants of Tihar were spindly and barrel-chested, with long, multiple-jointed limbs. Their slate gray skin, covered with fine golden down, blended easily with the ochre moss of the forest.

"Something is wrong," Alston told her finally. "These people are badly frightened. They're leaving the forest and heading west into unknown country. I don't understand it, and Tuluk is vague about the actual danger. He's warning us to leave at once. And Tuluk doesn't scare easily, so it must be something out of the ordinary."

The leader glanced apprehensively about as he talked, his voice rising and falling in the birdlike cadences of his speech. Alston gestured toward the wrecked ship, then the girl, shook his head in negation, and shrugged eloquently.

Gesticulating, chirping wildly, the native chieft rounded up his followers and melted swiftly into the shadowed gloom of the forest.

"What was that all about?" asked Kial uneasily.

Alston snorted. "I still don't know. I explained that we could not go in the ship. He wanted us to come with him. I told him that was equally impossible, that you wouldn't last ten miles the way they travel. Don't worry about it. There's danger, but we knew that. Besides, these natives don't always make sense. They've different mental processes from ours. Not quite human. What scared them might mean nothing to us. Volcano, earthquake, food shortage. They're superstitious, too. Maybe a god growled at them."

"What are we going to do?"

Alston grinned. "Hole up. I know where I am now. I hoped to get guide service, but we won't need it. Tuluk told me how to get where we're going. I spotted the place a while back on one of my survey trips. Seems like a good place to hide for a while. I have a cache of supplies there. Three hours of rough going, though. One hour, Tuluk said, but that means three for us. Messy job, pawing through this muck."

Alston climbed into the trees and rummaged in the shattered 'copter for usable equipment. His total find amounted to a pair of radilume flashbeams, some tablets of

food concentrate, water in a self-cooling canteen and his heat gun. He scrambled back to the ground and struck out boldly through the jungle.

It was Kial Nasron's first experience of Venusian forest. She wondered how Alston could keep his directions at all. To her it was a vast nightmare, staggering, impressive, but without order or definite form. Here was nothing of the cultivated parklands of Earth. Titanic trees towered upward and lost themselves in gloom, their knotted trunks like the columns of a giant's temple. Overhead was a blank mass of foliage so dense that practically no light filtered down from the uneasy gray glare of sky.

Colossal tree-ferns and gigantic mushrooms gave the place a goblin aspect, like the background of some sinister fairy-tale, and underfoot the ground moved queasily as if she trod upon the crust of quagmire. Coarse, thorny scrub and a moldering confusion of rotting tree trunks blocked the aisles, and higher up interwoven vines and trailing beards of moss knotted together the dense growth of trees in complex tapestries of shadow. Footing was treacherous, although a luminosity hovered above the sinks of decaying vegetation, and by this tricky light, they made frequent detours to avoid bogholes and the bubbling sinks of steaming-hot water. The air was thick, moist and nauseous with the foulness of gas rising from the layers of mold. Each step was an adventure.

After two hours of tramping and stumbling through choked aisles of sodden jungle, Kial Nasron was out on her feet.

FORTUNATELY, they had reached higher ground. Outcroppings of lichen-crust rock broke the morass of soft, unsteady ground, and she fell less often. Alston paid no heed to her or her difficulties. He marched steadily on, and, gasping and perspiration-soaked, she made shift to keep up. A terror of being abandoned in the awesome wilderness urged her faltering muscles.

They climbed a rise and came out on a flat, shelving rock at the top of a watershed.

On the far side, the ledge overlooked a circular depression miles in extent. Here, Alston halted. The strength went out of Kial, and she collapsed weakly on the bare

rock. Alston gave her food and water and seemed bitterly amused by her plight.

"We're almost there," he said. "Better get used to it. We're home."

On the near side, the hollow was rimmed by sheer cliffs, across its expanse, perhaps fifty miles away, was a chain of high, smoking volcanoes, their red glare reflected from the overcast, drenching the plain with hellish light. Hundreds of feet below was the pit floor, fairly level and carpeted with flowing grass or the ocherous moss.

Before them, sloping from a wedge-like salient of the precipice, a stone-flagged pathway lay straight across the plain toward the city!

At first, in the crimson splendor, it seemed less like a man-made fabric than some curious natural formation rising from the rust-tinted grasslands. In shape it was like a tangle of oddly regular hills and the vegetation swarming over it added to the illusion. But a closer look showed too much geometry for accidental weathering.

Gradually the outlines assumed form. City-size, it seemed to be the complex ramifications of a single building, terraced, overgrown with a thick matting of vines until the place resembled a hanging garden.

Kial Nasron suppressed a shiver, for there was an utterly alien quality about the megalithic structure that both depressed and frightened her. Over both city and hollow rose an aura of something dreadful and unholy, as if the ghosts of some ancient dwellers brooded in forgotten solitudes within.

As they descended the rough pathway and moved along the stone flagging toward the abandoned megalopolis, both man and girl were conscious of a quiver which ran through ground and air. Stopping, Alston knelt and placed a hand flat on the ground. Even through the thick moss, a vibration was perceptible, and something like a weak electric shock ran up his arm, numbing wrist, elbow and the shoulder joint. Now he was aware of a muted throbbing, like the beat of a heavy, steady pulse.

Nearer the city, ground tremors were stronger, and his ears caught a clearly audible echo from the vibrating air. Had he been wrong in believing the city was deserted? On the previous visit he had seen

nothing nor felt any awareness of an alien presence.

Before them, the path shone in the rubrous light, and the city wall rose like a sheer cliff, casting a black shadow toward them like a reaching hand.

Now the ruin seemed more complete than before, and a vanguard of the forest reached out a dark arm, encircling the edifice.

"Looks as if the previous tenants had been careless with the fixtures," Kial Nasron said in mock bravado. "At least they did not forget the red carpet."

"Quiet neighborhood," Alston echoed her thought. Suddenly he knew what was different.

The silence. This time there was no hum of insect life, no rustling as the wind moved through the grass. No sense of movement as the wild things prowled at will within the dark labyrinths of the ancient city. There was silence, complete, profound, blanketing and smothering every sound save one, the muted throbbing.

Penetrating deeply into the shadow, they stood at last before a tall gateway. As they hesitated, a long green snake of vine-creeper writhed down from the stone frame, darting, coiling, lashing at them like a living serpent.

Alston struck at it, then whipped out the heat gun and pressed the stud. A pencil beam of dazzling brilliance leaped out. With a scorched stench the tentacle withdrew, squirming hideously.

"Watch those things," he warned Kial Nasron. "Some of them are dangerous. Their poison is a swift corrosive."

Inside the gateway was both sound and movement. A convulsive stirring ran along the vine-covered walls, and a sound between a hiss and a soft rustling struck their ears. Here, too, the pulsing throb was more pronounced. It was as if the plant-things of the deep jungle had over-run and conquered the city, turning it to some evil purpose of their own. The city might be dead, but the forest was alive, watching, waiting. Every wall and column was encrusted with dark masses of greenery, every avenue an alley garlanded with vines and moss. Ugly, twisting fungi and monstrous tree ferns grew from the broken pavement. Sinister ripple

of movement coursed the man and girl. The city reeked with fear.

IV

SECURITY POLICE turned Hailard's fast cruiser back at the last barrier before the Tihar Forest—the Holy Mountains. The patrols had failed to head off the fugitive Alston before he had reached the forest, and the effort had now become a complex operation of combing the Tihar area in scout planes in the faint hope of discovering the missing 'copter and its occupants. Therefore, after putting the machinery in readiness for the job ahead, Hailard had awaited the arrival of Torkeg Nasron before taking an active part in the search.

Responding to the Security Patrol signals, he leapt to the visiphone transmitter and angrily demanded explanations. A stormy interview with Nasron had done nothing for his patience.

"Top priority," Hailard shouted into the transmitter, heedless of amplifiers.

"All priorities are cancelled," an imper-turbable junior officer told him coldly. "General Emergency. Contact Central Security in Castarona for instructions. At once. That is all."

Hailard dialed the Castarona wavelength.

A thin, recorded voice was broadcasting, half-newscast, half-official pronouncement. As soon as the message was finished, it was repeated for the benefit of new listeners.

"—Believed that an unheard-of mutation has taken place on a large scale. No precedent. Action will be taken as soon as the full extent and nature of this fantastic development can be determined. The disturbance is of a nature both electromagnetic and atomic, and seems to be centered in the swampy districts of the extreme western range of the Tihar Forest, approximately 1,300 miles from Castarona. Little is known of this area, and the few explorations which have been attempted in the past met with disaster.

"Landings will be difficult, and surface penetration is not to be considered. However, suicide squads are now being recruited among the convict laborers most familiar with conditions in the Tihar Forest with full pardon as reward, and an expedition

will be launched for the purpose of mapping and reconnoitering the locale. If possible, landings are to be made and the menace run to earth, although not much is hoped for in this line since the terrain is swampy and practically impassable on foot. Bulletins will be issued as further material becomes available.

"Repeat—

"General alarm! Warning, do not enter the Tihar Forest area for any reason.

"Within the past two months a startling change has been taking place in the Tihar vegetation. It was noted weeks ago in the outer trading posts and most advanced weather stations. Experts sent to the spot have made their reports, and the story can now be told.

"Three small villages and one sizable town have been utterly destroyed. Refugees have begun to drift in with tales of massacre and destruction. Piecing together their stories, and giving a new consideration to the reports by plant experts, we can quickly understand what has happened. A pattern becomes apparent.

"It is general knowledge that the Tihar Forest is unique, even on Venus. Its plant life is all mutant and practically unclassified. This mutant vegetation, isolated as it is and not under observation by qualified scientists, continued its variant development. Now, the whole forest, with all its manifold life forms, has suddenly become symbiotic. Plants, animals, and possibly other life-forms totally unfamiliar to us, are now united in one communal, interdependent life. The forest is functioning as a gigantic organism with each of its previous entities as a single shell.

"Not only is this gigantic organism a functioning entity, but it is intelligent, malignant, ambitious. We must not fall into the pitfall of considering this monstrous entity merely a gigantic plant or community. There is much more behind such a development than a mere changed relationship between the life entities involved. The forest has come to life, become a sentient, functioning, thinking, mobile monster.

"It is on the move, conquering, killing, destroying everything that stands in its way. Plants that were earth-bound by complicated root-systems are developing new forms and

members, and becoming mobile. The larger forms, such as the ancient trees, in which such rapid evolution is impossible, are functioning as a supply house for the more quickly adaptable forms. The whole being becomes an army, backed by an alert, efficient industry, converting the chemical and nuclear treasure-house of Tihar into a formidable war machine.

"This is a challenge which may not be denied. We must revise our whole approach to the colonization and re-civilizing of Venus, even our habits of thought. Plants, hitherto the docile or helpless servants of mankind, have become a deadly enemy and a threat to our very survival as a dominant life-form. Clouds of spores descended on the unsuspecting inhabitants with an effect similar to that of poison gas. A grull-cat hunter gives an account of being pursued by a variety of plants and wild animals, acting in concert as if directed by a master brain.

"This is just a sample. More will come. If the mutation continues and spreads, even our domesticated plants and animals may turn and rend us like a pack of wolves. We are living on borrowed time, and some kind of decisive action must be taken.

"Recent recordings taken by various weather stations indicate emanations of some unusual force within the forest as if power were being generated on a large scale. We now believe that these readings and the mutations are related. Authorities admit that it is believed—"

Hailard clicked off the switch, and gave orders to change the course to Castarona. His eyes met those of Torkeg Nasron and locked. Armored silence sprang between them. Nasron broke it.

"Does this mean that you are abandoning the attempt to rescue my daughter from this madman?"

Hailard shook his head sadly. "There is nothing we can do at the moment. We can accompany the suicide squads, perhaps learn something. From the broadcast, I surmise that Kial is dead. And Alston, too."

"You said the same thing about Annelle. We have reason . . ."

Hailard interrupted. "This situation is different. Worse, Annelle was living on borrowed time, even if she survived the wreck of the *Krajulla*. I feel much worse about

Kial. I liked her. For that matter, Alston too. Rotten bad luck that he chose such a time for his break, and the girl got in his way. I doubt if he'd have harmed her deliberately. The man was desperate, bitter, even crazy angry, but he's no natural killer. It was just his way of hitting back at you. Making you sweat a little."

Torkeg Nasron smiled sardonically and sadly, musing to himself that no man ever beats the game. The price of a six-year-old treachery had finally caught up with him and he was paying in the biggest coin he owned.

In Castarona, three fast VE survey ships were being hastily armed. Files of convict volunteers ceased work to watch a squadron of six battleships lift from their cradles and head for the remote fastnesses of the Tihar in ragged, irregular formation. Within minutes, a flight of G-class rocket scouts blasted off to follow the cumbersome battlewagons.

Signals shrilled. Convicts who had volunteered for the suicide squads went aboard and waited. Blinker lights winked on and off in color codes. At the last moment, Hailard and Nasron climbed into the pilot's quarters, with new bulletins and final calculations from the detectors locating the trouble center. It should not take long for the suicide command to overtake and pass the heavily armored military aircraft. Within two hours, three at the most if headwinds were strong, or if storms were encountered over the forest, the ships should reach the target area.

Field sirens moaned and the jets let go with a staggered roar.

DEEP within the city, before an oval pierced through an immense wall of squared and jointed megaliths, Alston paused. Huddled close beside him, like a dog or a terrified child, the girl drew comfort from the man's physical nearness.

Kial Nasron could not afterwards remember how they had come to the place. There was confused impression of moving through a labyrinth of endless, winding, dark avenues. The ruddy glare made but a feeble glimmering upon monstrous colonnades or touched with vague mystery the hideous reliefs carved upon titanic walls. Above, towered the bulking mass of a shat-

tered citadel. On either hand, sheer as the cliffsides of a narrow canyon, walls rose in terraced setbacks to the gloomy arch of sky. Everywhere was mute, colossal evidence of alien evolutions, and everywhere the rank, bloated growth of unnatural vegetation.

Guarding the portal were gigantic effigies in stone of gods vanished and forgotten when the universe was young. From outside, nothing of the building's interior could be made out, for a screen of dense shadow blocked the oval opening. Kial hung back, shivering, as Alston strode to the doorway.

"Wait here if you like," he said. "At least till I look around inside. There have been changes since I was last here. All this growth is new. . . ."

Panic shrilled through her as she glanced about at the grotesque shadow-shapes.

"I'll go with you," she said quickly. "I'm afraid to stay out here alone."

Alston nodded, with a surge of rough sympathy. "Suit yourself. But stick close in case of trouble. We may be just imagining things."

Her voice was hollow and awoke strange echoes among the dry, murmurous rustling of the vines. "How dared you ever come here before, alone? There is something dreadful. . . ."

"It was different, then."

Alston plunged boldly into the shadow, the girl following reluctantly.

Inside, the air was warm, humid, stifling, full of the fetid odors of a hothouse. Silence stunned the ears. Even the restless stirring sounds of the vines faltered and died away. There was complete absence of sound as different from ordinary stillness as death is from life. Something tangible was gone from the very air. Withdrawn. Breathless, waiting hush, lifeless as a shroud, pervaded the somber interior.

There was light of an eerie sort, a flickering play of shadows shot with pearly ghosts, lambent as moonflames, which hung in thick layers like drifting smoke or moved in shifting planes like faintly glowing draperies.

Slowly their eyes became accustomed to the dimness and they perceived the dimensions of the place. It was a vast circular space, like some tremendous hall that might have been a temple, above soared vague immensities of a vaulted dome, and the paved

floor was strewn with the rubble of titanic collapse. Before them, in terraced crescents, like a giant's staircase crumbling into ruin, the flooring fell away into a central depression.

Here were rank on rank of noxious, ugly tree-growths, jutting from displaced paving blocks—each plant a gnarly, jointed trunk crowned with clusters of motionless tentacles. Ranged about the terraces, they parodied the attitudes of worshippers within some unholy temple. Each massive wall was thickly tapestried in matted hangings of the ophidian vines, but here their unceasing undulations were stilled, frozen into rigid immobility.

Hovering about the central depression was a zone of denser shadow, obscuring and distorting vision. What light existed in this core of darkness was troubled, uncertain. The spot attracted Alston's interest, but he could see nothing clearly.

In the deathlike hush, their footsteps made no whisper of sound and the man and girl descended the broken terraces among moving planes of light and shadow to the rim of darkness. Down the ruinous steps, their progress was sluggish as if they drifted bodiless in some exasperating dream fabric.

There came a flurry of disturbance in the shadowy zone, a wan, uneasy flickering glow, as if light flares struggled through thick, resisting slabs of murky crystal. Steadily it grew, quickening, mounting, flaming into raw emerald brilliance. Taller it soared, spreading, dispersing the murk, beating back the fanes of darkness, revealing the temple in all its monstrous size, its splendor, and its crumbling ruin. Revealing—

The Pit!

AT THE heart of the place, sunk into the pave, was a deep round pit, brimming with fiery luescence. It swam with light, with color and movement, boiling like a wizard's cauldron. The disturbed surface heaved and frothed, churned, rose and fell in slow rhythmic pulsing. Above it hovered myriad tongues of darting argent flame. From it light foamed upward, showers of luminous bubbles rose and danced and shattered in clouds of radiance as diffuse as a mist of pearls.

Here was the source of that strange en-

ergy, that throbbing force which vibrated through the ground and air outside, for as the substance of the pit rose and fell in its rhythmic cycle, so did the sound and vibration swell and diminish, so did the light flare and fade.

From a curb of carved and figured stone a sculptured ramp swept up and out and down in graceful arch onto an island of black rock set within the pit. Harshly outlined, its detailed fretwork sharp and clear, the island rose solidly from the pool of glittering light.

But on the island was sheer madness. From a pedestal block of faceted stone thrust upward two mighty curved horns of fluted jade resembling the frames of an ancient lyre. Thirty feet in the air they soared, and pendant between them was a sparkling veil, gossamer as the finest spider-silk, dusted with incandescent moonfire. Meshed in this sheer fabric, prisoned like a silvery moth caught upon a great spiderweb, was a figure of terrible beauty.

Seething in witchflames, netted in a tumult of frosted lightnings, was the white, graceful body of a woman. Naked in body and stripped of soul, limbs and trunk rigid, her figure was tortured into the attitude of a hieratic symbol. The face was bowed but calm, blending sinister serenity with an expression of impassive anguish. Staring, the eyes were chill with some unholy suspension between death and life. Soft glory of hair flowed upward to mingle inextricably in the weave of silvered veiling, and the slender arms stretched up and outward, cruciform, as if to suggest a hideous sacrifice. A beautiful soulless nymphon!

"Annelle!"

He cried aloud, stared in wildest frenzy, shouted her name, shook his fist in impotent fury at the dead gods set about in their sculptured niches.

Light gathered in awesome brilliance on the ledge about the pit, thickening like a solid substance, so that the pit, the island, with its great curving horns, and the prisoner upon the draping silvery veil seemed frozen within glittering crystal. The scene was fantastic nightmare ensorcelled into hideous permanence.

One sharp glimpse, then scurrying shadows flowed upward from the pool, dim,

shapeless beings in mad conflict with the flooding splendors of alien quicksilver.

Alston was barely conscious of Kial's screaming. Tranced, he stumbled down the remaining steps to the ledge. He was dimly aware of Kial's voice, her hands clawing at him, restraining. Then he was beside the pit, standing, staring up the ramp. In his arms was a limp body—Kial's. A faintly glowing nimbus outlined her features, congealed them into an echo of that same unearthly coldness, that same calm horror and impassive anguish of the other's.

Something had flowed from her, withdrawn, and the shell that remained was not Kial. Alive, she had meant nothing to him, but dead, or worse, she became a symbol of the tortured loneliness and frustration of his life.

She was dead. This thing in his arms was no more Kial than that other being was—

Annelle! White agony of memories burned through his veins, became a madness. His sense of double loss was unbearable. He dropped the limp thing in his arms.

THE temple stirred, became suddenly sensible of his human presence. Whispered murmurings rose in volume, became a tide of slithering sound. The ranks of greenery moved toward him.

Unheeding, Alston staggered to the soaring ramp. Ahead, he sensed vaguely the figure of radiance, rags of stolen moonsilver flowing from it. Caught by some unholy lure, he forced a way toward it, moving slowly, sluggishly as if the very air grew dense and sought to impede him.

At the pedestal, knees buckled under him. His knees scraped jagged stone. He floundered, recovered, stared upward, reaching.

Infelical glory lit the face. Nearer, he could see that it bore less resemblance to humanity than to the half-open, convoluted petals of a strange flower. Within its muted planes were the soft, chill delicacies of an orchid, the flushed, still colors of a rose in moonlight. About her hovered a funereal fragrance, sickeningly sweet, like the perfume of no blossom of Earth or Mars.

Flowerlike, she stirred, eyelids twitched and lifted, petal-white lips moved.

In dread miracle, she spoke. Articulation was difficult and the sound seemed to come

from immense distances. The tones were soulless, a rippling sibilance of sounds and half-accented syllables, the words a meaningless babel upon his ears. She spoke in whispers, softly murmuring, ecstatic. . . .

In his brain images formed, alien, untranslatable.

He saw the ancient city at the height of its power. Streets thronged with a strange people, in form the product of a variant evolution. This was their city, their temple. Here they housed a god-thing, slimy, monstrous, a being of their own creation, blending within itself something of both protoplasmic matter and living energy. Here in the temple it lived and was worshipped by strange rites and awful sacrifice.

Then came a whirlwind of war. The race of creators and worshippers vanished, destroyed with their enemies when the atomic weapons of both races burst the bounds, sweeping in fiery wrath over seas and continents until the planet lay bare and smoldering. The race died, but their god-thing lived.

Deep within the sacred fountain of its temple, the slime-being lay dormant. But the ravening atomic fires had touched off a vein of almost pure uranium beneath the city. Something of that atomic fire still lingered, spreading slowly through the mass, reacting like a slow pile, half-alive, partially radioactive. Through the ages, the element fissioned, emitting low-degree heat and some radiant energy. In its pit of slow incubation, the god-thing developed, awakened to new life, grew in strength and diabolical intelligence.

In time it wearied of passive existence, hungered after more power and freedom of movement. Bursting its bonds, it rose into the well, whence it hurled forth impulses, urgent, hypnotic, angry and summoning. With promises and deceptions it lured the forest, called to itself the more mobile plants, enslaved the green living things.

Of itself, it gave to them new strength and intelligence, made of them more mobile beings. It roused them to fantastic development and stirred to life their latent dreams of green conquest. By complex symbiosis, it bound them to itself, made willing servants and worshippers of them. The forest had become a vast, single, interdependent community.

The woman-thing—its voice—had strayed within the precincts of its dread power. She, also, had been lured, overpowered, enslaved. Partially absorbed by the god-being, wholly dependent, the woman had become a nymphon, a temple handmaiden, little more than a decoration, existing solely by its whim.

The voice died away. Unconscious of sound, Alston sensed the images fading from his mind.

Standing boldly on the pedestal, Alston reached upward to tear and strike at the horror on the veil. Shrieking, he assailed the monstrous thing which was neither plant nor woman, alternating words and blows. Hate seethed in his brain, hate and pain and grief. He cried out and hurled himself savagely, lusting to destroy.

It was the last thing he remembered clearly. From the depths below came a throb of fearful power. The pool churned. Lightnings raved about the suspended veil, the netted figure. The woman-thing writhed piteously in the tumult of energy. Alston's upreaching arms carried the current to his body. The shock stunned, paralyzed.

Then came momentary impression of vegetation surging toward him in dark billows. Hellish tendrils dragged him down. Great, leathery leaves enfolded him, lifting his numbed body high. He was hurled bodily across the shimmering well, caught up again and juggled with heedless violence. Lashing, steely tentacles played with him and passed him swiftly through dim spaces. Flesh cringed from the cloying contact of the vines. Battered, nauseated, half-unconscious, he felt the touch of abysmal horror.

Then, contemptuously, he was flung in a grotesque sprawl of arms and legs, spurned through the gateway of the outer wall.

OUTSIDE the city, lines of battle were drawn up across the valley. On one side, squads of the convict volunteers held back green waves of plant-life with batteries of flame-throwers, heat rays, grenades and poison gas bombs. Ranged against them were the unlimited numbers of the forest folk, plants and animals alike thrusting in a dark salient from the thickly grown slopes. Near the city was a clear space, but ragged

knots of combatants were locked in deadly struggle, contending for the approach.

Flame-throwers bit deep indentations in the massed plant-things, and an acrid stench of charred greenery rose in choking clouds. The green armies struck back viciously with flights of venomed thorns and a barrage of spore-cases which burst with startling force and showered the humans with corrosive dust. It was deadlock, a determined, murderous see-saw with advantage to neither.

A scouting party brought Alston to the ships.

"We knew that you and Kial Nasron were inside the city," Hailard said grimly. "A native chieftain, Tuluk, told us how you came here. We've delayed flattening the city with atomics in the faint hope you might come out alive."

His gesture indicated the circling warships overhead, which occasionally swooped down to take a hand in the conflict with sticks of dropped bombs.

"How did you dare land your ships here?" Alston asked. "From the air this plain looks like a swamp, the city just a strangely shaped hill."

"Convicts dropped first, by parachute. They signalled to come in."

Nasron clutched desperately at Alston. "Kial?" he queried hopelessly.

"She's still in there."

"Alive?"

"I don't know. Unconscious or dead. But you can't use the bombs in any case. That thing—whatever it is—feeds on atomic energy. It would be immune to radiation and heat, and the rubbish of the temple would protect it from the blast."

Hailard gestured wearily. "What can we do, then?"

Alston hesitated. "You can't do much. If you'll trust me, there's something I'd like to try. It may not work, but you'll be no worse off. I'll need a small, fast plane and a pilot with guts. Also a flame-thrower and some grenades, both incendiary and explosive. A parachute—"

Hailard's eyes met Alston's in understanding. He nodded, shouting orders.

Rocket tubes blasting, the tiny plane drew a trail of fire through the gray sky. Over the city it nosed into a steep power dive, bored down in thunder, skimming walls and ter-

aces. Over the shadowy courtyard of the temple enclosure, it pulled out, zoomed swiftly, topped the near buildings and vanished. Behind it a parachute burst open in white flowering.

Burdened with the carrying case of grenades and a portable flame-thrower, Alston dropped like a plummet. Pressing a release, he slipped from the harness before his feet touched the ground. He landed, running.

Before him, the flame-thrower belched its roaring scimitar, and snarls of the knotted greenery withered from his path. Half a moment brought him to the oval portal. Gouts of fire washed it clear of the tangling obstructions.

Choking, he kicked through the smoking ashes and burst into the temple's gloom. The place was alive with menace. Murmurings built into shrill tumult.

Down the crumbling terraces he stumbled, cutting a wide swath with the swishing flame. The temple buzzed like an angry beehive. At the pit's edge, the flame-thrower's reservoir ran dry. It hissed and the fiery jets died. He flung it into the pressing dark.

Knelling, he stared into the quivering horror of the pit! The jellied light within stirred with life, bubbling furiously. With his teeth Alston drew out the pins of two grenades, dropped them. Two more. Feverishly, as rapidly as hands could function, he jerked out pins and hurled the bombs deep into the churning protoplasm in the pit.

From below came a staggered flash, followed by jarring concussions. The pit was a manifold convulsion of movement. Fans of flame spurted upward, became fountains of light and uproar. Waves of sound and pressured air hurled Alston back from the curbing. With the last burst shot up quivering, ugly chunks of pulpy matter which clung and burned.

Crawling masses of vegetation reached him, struck, broke in myriad struggling forms. Tentacles and tendrils of vine bore him down, overwhelming in their clinging embrace. His heat gun burned them through, loosening their grip. He broke clear.

Something like a fiery whip flicked his face, drawing blood and shooting rivulets of pain through arms and legs. Vines licked out, enwrapped him, lashing, constricting.

Steel-hard tentacles bound his arms to his body, crushing. From the surrounding dark came muffled explosions as spore-pods burst. A fine mist of searing dust powdered his face. Dust stung nostrils raw, burned into his eyes.

Incredible sound shrieked from the pit. A cry of mortal agony. Vines and tentacles released suddenly. Alston staggered and slumped to the floor. Blind, tortured, gasping for breath, he dragged himself. Groping fingers found the curb and led him to the ramp. Crawling, he inched his way over its high-flung span, down. Upright again, he stood before the pedestal, climbed upon it, fingers numbed and bloody. His arms stretched upward toward the frightful thing upon the web.

Blind, he did not see the swift blight overtake that lovely body. He did not see the rot which turned the softly molded limbs to dripping slime, the charnel dropped-les form and course down the blackened webbing.

He did not see the sudden withering of vines and snake-trunked treeforms in the temple, the dark, ugly writhings of the stricken plant-things, the collapse and convulsive death of all the fearsome, unnatural legions outside. He did not hear the dry, crisp, rustling fall of dead, shrunken leaves throughout the forest.

Blind and insensible, Alston stood upon the island pedestal in the ruined temple, arms yearning upward in hopeless supplica-

tion to the monstrous, decaying horror on the veil. He still stood there when a mopping-up squad of convicts searched the temple and found him. Raving, he was borne away to the returning ships.

IT IS another matter that he awakened later in the radiation hospital at Quanta City. Beautiful Kial Nason, also suffering from painful radiation burns, sat beside him on the bed when he tore off the bandages and opened his eyes upon darkness. She pressed him gently back to the pillow, told him that he had been freely pardoned, and promised that he would see again, months later, when the paralysis had left his optic nerves.

It is also another matter that when Kial and her father returned to Mars Craig Alston went along, and that a court there reversed its findings in his case, restoring full civil rights which a man needs to be married.

In time even a man like Torkeg Nason can be civilized into a potential father-in-law. Craig Alston volunteered for the Second Trans-Plutonian Expedition, and while Kial waits for him, she can work upon her father. But in the years ahead, she and Alston will rarely speak of Venus with its age-old mystery, its forgotten cities and strange plants. And they will try not to think of the temple and the Circean monster in its sacred well, nor of the thing that hung upon a veil of woven moonbeams. . . .



THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

horse, pal, it's much more fun down here with the common herd.

Oh yes, the pix: my vote goes to Ed Cox, David Campbell and J. W. Leake. All three letters were intelligently written. I especially liked Ed's reply to Mr. Strong. You took the words right out of my mouth, pal.

So long,

PVT. ROY R. WOOD

COVER ME!

Stc., 11-406 Notre Dame Ave.,
Wpg., Man., Canada

Hi Mal:

Once again this weary one is typing out a missive to you. So read on.

The INC. OF P.X. was a fairly good story but I don't know if it was the effects of that glass of scotch I had or what, 'cause I found it hard to read the first few pages.

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS was run-of-the-mill stuff. Gahh.

SANCTUARY, OH, was fair.

St. Clair's short story was too long. A documentary yet.

LAST NIGHT OUT. Better watch this one for reprints ten years from now, old boy.

TYDOR'S GIFT. Smelled the ending from the first page.

THE WATCHERS?????

VENGEANCE ON MARS. Ha. Also Ho. Give me Ulla any day.

HOSPITALITY. Ha. I raved about it. The paddy wagon came and took me away yesterday.

Haven't attacked the Viz. yet but did notice one letter by a chap named Mitchell. Wonder what he looks like?? Seems to be nice. Know, old boy??

Is dear old Jerome free-lancing again or have they put him to washing floors??

Browsing through a friend's collection I noticed your name on Planet about ten years ago. Guess a big "WELCOME BACK TO THE FOLD" sign is in order, no??

I still haven't heard from Ken, and his whoorple.

Myltots as of late has disappeared for parts unknown, apparently to seek a weapon to wreak his revenge. Oh, well. Who cares. I can always get spare parts from Cap. Fututre. Ha. Bet you didn't know I was Gragg did you, M.?

Ha. Also Ho. So now I'm the Vice-President . . . of your mag??

Okay now, boy. Let's pass the pics down this way some bright and cheery day.

Y'know I was talking to a friend of mine and I happened to say it'd be a cold day in June when I read PLANET again. Seeing as how it's around 50 above now, I am now reading it again.

Say, can anyone help me out in regards to covers and backs for old Argosies?? I've got around 50 discards that need covers so if anyone can help out, will they let me know?

Well have to go and see THE THING. Strangely reminds me of editors.

Ta. Ta.

Yours stfanatically,

DOUGLAS MITCHELL

P.S. One of these days I'm going to get mad enuff and send you my story just to see you go crazy.

THE BIG QUESTION

1521 So. Holt Ave.,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Editor:

Even though I have not as yet read the stories in the current issue of Planet Stories I am inspired by the fine quality of the Vizigraph.

Mr. Strong's letter seems to have caused the desired amount of furor, and while this bickering is a bit trite in a mag, he certainly brought rise to some intelligent response. It was a pleasure to read the fans' quiet, logical arguments, pro and con.

While I do not agree with Mr. Strong's viewpoints, they do make me begin to look a little more seriously at science-fiction. I consider myself an average, intelligent person and, though by no means intellectual, I have read much of the so-called better literature. And while I realize the superior quality of this type of literature and enjoy it, I am always drawn back to Stf. for my steady reading habit.

For the last year I've thought that the time would come where I would outgrow the attraction, but the change has not yet come about. I don't know what it is, but there is an irresistibility about science-fiction and good fantasy that constantly draws me to it.

At this time I am 17 years old, and consider Stf. excellent reading for my age group. But, though I like it, I find it hard to understand just what it is that obviously intelligent adults find so attractive about a pulp magazine with a splashy cover. The writing (some of it) can be superb, as we all know, but also the style and plots of such books as Steinbeck's OF MICE AND MEN and Waltari's THE EGYPTIAN are equally fine and easily finer.

Since I read fiction in both of the aforementioned fields it can be assumed that my more aged cronies in Stf. do also. But why does Stf. hold such universal appeal for so many intelligent people? Why do they read it when there are so many better minds of fiction to choose from (myself included)? It really is a mystery to me.

Sincerely,

CARL SCHEMMERLING

SOCKO!

914 Hammond Road
Ridgewood, New Jersey

Dear Malcolm,

What a shame you had to lose Bix, but it now gives him a chance to write for PLANET. God knows, you sure need good writers, and if you land Sturgeon maybe you can get somewhere.

If I may, I would like to comment on your past covers. Did you know that four or five of your past eight issues has had a broad flying through space without any means of visible support? Also, on your latest Science-Fiction Books, half of your cover has a picture almost identical to the cover of your first bi-monthly one. Hell, get a different and decent cover artist. On your July issue the fair haired boy's left arm, which is feverishly clutching the broad's midsection, looks like a paw.

What a letter section, nothing but Strong, Strong, Strong. Pics are, Oliver, Campbell, and Cox. To give everybody something to fight over, I will simply state "Neville writes like Bradbury." This should keep PLANET'S La viz, going strong for a couple of months.

Gad, what novels. Gripping, no less. Imagine, PLANET actually has novels that run 26 PAGES. No other magazine can make that statement.

Since this thing has to go by midnight oil, I didn't

read the yarns. And the typing. Don't leave in the mistakes! It's 10 after 12, and if you can do a better job, go ahead and see if I give a hang.

Your eternal slave,

DAVE ISH

CALENDAR, WHERE ART THOU?

P. O. Box 304
Aurora, Colorado

Vizigraph:

In March, 1951, you begin with, "Happy New Year"; and end by saying, "A Riverderrri until March First." This is a language out of my world.

It would help me to read with greater rapidity future editions of *PLANET STORIES*, if you would let me have a free copy of the calendar speaking your language—and wouldn't it be clarifying if you would give me a free (of all cost and expense) bottle of *RIVERDERRI* with its strength cut and diluted with rum or whiskey.

Yours truly,

JESSE ELLER

HONORED

13-10 Alexander Ave.
Fair Lawn, N. J.

Dear Sir:

I would have you know that you are honored to be the first SF mag to receive one of my highly valued (by me) and learned epistles. Now that you know how highly honored you are, leave us go on to the business at hand.

I seem to be an issue too late to have a hand in tearing Dennis Strong apart. However a good job was done in the July issue so I will leave Mr. Strong with one thought. Phooey and a byxneney to you, Denny.

Now, letter hacks may sometimes be excused for taking liberties with the King's English, but not editors. For shame, Bix! Did you write the blurb for *Mercy Flight* in the table of contents and over the story itself? "It was a lesson you learned in the Space-Forces, and you learned it good." Maybe you did quit school at the age of nine. Didn't your mother ever tell you how to use good and well? Hmmmm?

I will now tell the world (anyway the part of the world that reads the *Vizigraph*) my opinions on SF in general. I suppose this puts me in the general class of parasitical dilettantes for daring to put forth my opinions on the sacrosanct field reserved for long-bearded intellectuals.

I am an advocate of the thud and blunder, BEM-bunctious space opera. (The muted blaring of pridxquit horns sound in the distance.) It seems to me that there are too many *Deus ex Machina* or mechanized Aesop's fables going about with pretty little morals attached. (Call off the Wooglehounds, I'm not denouncing Bradbury, honest.)

Your cover was pretty good as always. Well, nearly always. Just one thing, the tranquil expression on Hlidaborg's face as she floated down in the arms of Alfric (who had a most satisfyingly hideous grimace upon his mug), knife in hand was amazing. I know if I ever found myself in the same position, which is highly unlikely, my face would be contorted with some violent emotion.

As you have probably guessed from the tone of my letter so far, I am of the "Naked girl cowering behind a three-leaved plant, while a lust-crazed BEM, who is being stalked by a spacesuited he-man armed with Atoblaster, searches for the aforementioned nude," school of thought. In other words I like my

covers downright lewd. And for all the prudes who holler that they are ashamed to be seen with this type of cover on the street, I suggest they try folding the cover back so they can walk in the sunshine once more and stop flitting furtively in the shadows.

And so, pulling our sweat-stained worples to rein, (you think Beal's got the only Worpole on Venus?) we arrive at the ratings.

This is going to be hard since all the stories were very good. To make it easier on myself I'll start with the worst and work down to the good.

Lowest of the Low—*SLAVE-SHIP TO ANDRIGO*—Ghagh!

Lowest of the Low—*TEMPLE OF HAN*—Ghagh!

Goodest of the Good—*SIGN OF LIFE*

Goodest of the Good—*MONSTER*

Goodest of the Good—*MERCY FLIGHT*

Goodest of the Good—*BLACKOUT IN CYGNI*

Bestest of the Best—*VIRGIN OF VALKARION*

Bestest of the Best—*VENUS MISSION*

Pics to 1) Ed Cox, 2) David Campbell, and 3) that pendant old fogey Zelitch. Thanx for letting me gas for so long.

Your truly,

MARTIN LEWKOWICZ

NIZE PEOPLE?

224 Broad Street
Newark, Ohio

Dear sir:

Not knowing how to address a robot I use the above as a compromise. Surely any robot bright enough to edit *PLANET* deserves to be called *sir*. Still, on the other hand . . .

One thing about a robot, he is presumably immune to such insults and vituperation as come his way via the *Vizigraph*. He'd better be.

Speaking of insults, the word is that Dennis Strong has reversed his field. He has an open letter in the current *QUANDRY* which is a masterpiece of crow-eating. Anyone who has the nerve to reap-roach fandom, hat in hand, with the avowed sincerity which he expresses, deserves, I should think, an open-armed welcome. It takes a lot of guts to admit that you were wrong.

After all, isn't it possible that a lot of the fans who write those obnoxious and infantile letters are really nice people? They just happened to choose the wrong facet of their personality to hold up to inspection. It doesn't prove mental incompetence, only bad judgment.

When *PLANET* is good it's breathtaking, when it's bad it's merely dull. This time it was somewhat breathtaking. Anderson's not-quite-space-opera read best to me. It's strange—in the hands of Hamilton or Coppel or some other sun-smasher the story would have been space-opera, pure and simple. Anderson keeps the duel of personalities uppermost. I don't mind saying I like him.

I like Ted Sturgeon, too. *INCUBI* was the first story dealing with disproportionate sizes I had read since '49. That was Leinster's *FURY FROM LIL-LIPUT*, and although I liked it, it got mostly brickbats. Well, I was young then. Younger, that is.

Among the shorts, *THE INHABITED MEN* stood out. A majority of the other offerings were also good.

I note, with bulging eyes, that I won a pic, *Ghu* knows how. Maybe I should burn incense to *Ghu*, eh? Thanks. (1st choice, Vestal's *TEMPLE OF HAN* illo. 2nd, the double-page *SLAVE SHIP TO ANDRIGO*. 3rd, Vestal's *THE TIMELESS ONES*.)

Gratefully,

DICK RYAN

HOLD THAT SPACEGRAM!

New Orleans, La.

Dear Space-Warped Ed,

Today, as I leaped into my rocketship, turned on the automatic pilot, and set course for my favorite newstand on Earth (to get P. S. of course) the idea hit me like the blow of a blaster! *I Must Send You A Spacegram!* After parting with my Martian quarter, and getting my mag I settled in my bunk, switched on the interstella antigravity gear, and hung motionless in space. I then buried my nose in the July issue of PLANET STORIES and this is the rating: the cover: as usual—male and female battling against fearful evil-doers. (Why don't you write about the cover?) First on the Blacklist is VENUS MISSION. Gruesome fellow this Blackwell, kept me in suspense all through the yarn.

Next came MONSTER with its delightful, hairy little friends. (While reading it I munched on my sixth toe of my fourth leg attached to my third torso, forgot to tell you I'm a Bem from the sixth dimension.) Third, SIGN OF LIFE. Cute guy this George Main. Didn't want nobody to forget him. Fourth was SLAVE SHIP TO ANDRIGO. Fifth, THE TIMELESS ONES. Sixth was BLACKOUT IN CYGNL. Seventh, MERCY FLIGHT. Honorable mention was THE VIRGIN OF VALKARION, and the stinker was THE TEMPLE OF HAN. No good ! ! ! !

Well nothing more to say except that worn out phrase, "keep up the good work".

Yours till
Maggie Jiggs

FRANK ODDO

(Pronounced Fstrouk-Oshnick)

P. S. How about a space-war novel? F. O.

UNDER-ROBOT

Long Island City,
New York

Dear Robot Man,

So you're the new editor of PLANET, poor guy (robot that is). I really feel sorry for you and I hope you do as good as Bixby to hold this rag together. This is the third Ed that I see come in on PLANET and I hope you can compare with both of them for they really did a good job. But you know what I think, metal man, you are being run at the other end by Bixby. I may be mistaken but I hope you are.

I just finished reading your mag you lucky dog (robot that is) while I was on my way to the Milky Way in my new gyro-drive Rocket ship. It really runs smooth. You oughta try it.

Now to talk about your mag:

You know that pic by Vestal on page 35 looks awful familiar, that dame looks like the same dame in your companion mag T.C.S.A.B. of "CITADEL IN SPACE. I may be wrong but I doubt it. Excuse me, I just realized I was wrong. But you gotta admit that all Vestal dames look the same. And who drew that marvelous cover, Anderson? Can't be, too good for Anderson.

As you probably have guessed already, this is my first letter to *La Planet*. But I thought it was about time to send a letter to you.

How about some more of Brackett. She's about the best writer in S.F. field, except for her husband and a few other guys by the name of Anderson, Bradbury, and a few others.

Though you have about the crummiest paper, you have awful good material to print on it. You carry a good staff of writers, one of the best but not the

best and also you have the best Letter Column in S.F. today.

Speaking about letters the one by Lanoue was a pip. I was laughing for the rest of the day. But nearly the same thing happened to me when I was Star-Hopping. I landed on Sirius 6 and tried to make friends with the occupants. In my back-pocket I was carrying a Planet mag. The chief of the people that I just now met asked me if he could see what was in my back-pocket. Poor guy. He dropped dead on the spot. The other inhabitants ran for their life. Then I realized that I possessed the most powerful weapon in the Universe, PLANET STORIES.

Second best letter was by John Davis, third by A. A. Craig. Yes, I know he's the writer who wrote WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS but that letter, I think, ranks third.

The best story of the ish was Sturgeon's. I really got a kick at it. I'm not saying his was a masterpiece but it was awful good reading. LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS ranks second but this was right behind the first. The other stories were Ugh and Ugh (Bem way of saying half and half).

Well, I better start to close this letter because by my t.v. set I can tell that you are already bored so Goombly.

Star Traveler,

JOSEPH SEMENOVICH

LITERARY!

402 West Clay
Houston 19, Texas

Dear Sir:

I wish to reply to the remarks made by Mr. Beck at the end of his letter in your September issue.

I. Further Explanation to the Extent of Utter Confusion: If Mr. Beck had read my letter before "refuting" it, he would have seen that the phrase "high-aesthetic nonsense" referred to the matter, not the manner, of Milton's epic, which, in outline, surely no-one of this age (except possibly Sigler, who, as he revealed in a personal letter to me concerning the same letter to which Mr. Beck objects, is as stupid religiously as politico-economically) could take seriously.

Thus I am insulting not Mr. Beck's taste but his religion. ("If he is unfortunate enough to have a religion so petty that it can be insulted . . . I claim the right to insult it to my heart's content."—G. B. Shaw) (I intend no insult to Milton, who was, I do not doubt, as intelligent in religious matters as the cultural formation of his time allowed him to be: witness his Arianism.)

But I must admit that I had no great respect for the manner, else had I spoken less disrespectfully of the matter. Dr. Johnson remarked very wisely that to read *Paradise Lost* is a task, because there is no human interest in the book. Furthermore, the meter is, even for blank verse, an unusual measure enough ordinarily, unusually harsh and cacophonous, while the odd mixture of allegory and mysticism with pure animism which the author has chosen for the description of his supernatural agencies adds to the absurdity of the plot at every line.

Even more serious is the defect pointed out by Taine in his admirable study of this poem (Hist. Eng. Lit., ch. on Milton, section VI): that at every incident the characters, natural and supernatural, indulge in long disputations resembling those of the schools. This trait ruins the character of Yahweh, and seriously mars several of the others.

To sum up: (and add): I prefer Milton's prose

work, and think that the *Areopagitica* will outlast anything metrical that he ever wrote.

II. The Best Defense Is a Good Offense: I am rather puzzled by Mr. Beck's last clause, which seems to say that "Most, if not all, U. S. and English-speaking colleges" (quotations around that, please; I want no-one to think that I believe that colleges hold opinions or speak any language, including English), while disagreeing vehemently among themselves, are united against me.

But I assume that Mr. Beck, who, for all his diatribes against the knowledge of style of Sneary et aliorum, seems to be rather shaky in ordinary English usage, means that the English textbooks used in the aforequalified colleges praise Milton, or perhaps that the faculties of the a. q. c. do the same. This being granted, nothing follows, unless Mr. Beck honestly thinks that textbooks and faculties are final arbiters of taste, which he doubtless does not mean.

I will admit that my language was somewhat too contemptuous to express my real opinion, but I deny that that opinion is in any way less likely to be right than the opposed opinion held by Mr. Beck.

Very likely Milton's poems have considerable merits to which I am blind. I know of no-one without blind spots; I flatter myself that my taste is considerably more catholic than that of most of my friends and acquaintances. Stevenson says, of growing old, "Milton is not so dull as he once was, nor perhaps Ainsworth so amusing." (Was Ainsworth ever amusing?) If this is so, I can wait, especially since I have Dr. Johnson's authority for believing that I am losing no pleasure, but rather a harassing "duty," by being unable to read more than a few hundred lines of *Paradise Lost*.

Of other matters: This is perhaps your best issue to date. Your policy seems to be, at present, heading toward something like Campbell's during the large-size, or bed-sheet, period: emphasis on ideas, with a considerable leavening of pure adventure. You have a long way to go, but you're on the right road.

First two spots go to A. A. Craig and Morton D. Paley. I have no candidate for third place. Thanks to those three or four who voted for me. Better luck this time?

Yours for the last time until I have another gripe, idea, or whatnot to pour onto paper,
MICHAEL WIGODSKY

ATTENTION, M. W. CORBY!

Dear Editor:

In my first letter to any editor of any significant anything, about anything, I wish to take exception to Mary Wallace Corby's unfavorable criticism of Ray Bradbury (Sept. issue).

"Surely there is no one left who believes in art for art's sake," she says.

Art, like a smile or a fervent "damn!", is a form of more or less satisfying self-expression—directly, as with the author or artist or composer, and vicariously, as with those who read or see or listen. If one accepts this definition, then anything read for relaxation, entertainment, pleasure, or escape is art, by implication, and the motto "art for art's sake" is only another way of saying that what is to be enjoyed should be thoroughly enjoyable because it is to be enjoyed. While a little redundant and obvious, this still makes more sense than the contradiction of same.

I haven't read everything Mr. Bradbury ever wrote.

But in what I have read I fail to see his alleged preoccupation with death "to the exclusion of all the nuances of living." Mr. Bradbury's technical skill, it seems to me, is devoted to presenting extremely clear pictures of elusive and very thought-provoking realities; certainly one cannot deny that comfort and appetite, that love, loyalty, knowledge, foresight, and other fine qualities, along with their absence or opposites, are shown in his writing, and certainly these are nuances of living.

Death, or at least dying, is a part of life, and while it is in character for a writer of superficial art to treat it superficially, an author who attempts to portray the elusive and mysterious in reality, must "give the devil his due." Death is a mystery to those of us who haven't experienced it, and it's bound to happen, and so is therefore real.

And it is neither fair nor logical to stigmatize an author by saying he holds a "... belief in the basic rottenness of mankind" when he graphically and credibly illustrates that the result of selfishness, of hate, of ignorance, is death for self or others. It is much more reasonable to assume that he feels a need for correction of some obvious flaws in our otherwise more or less worthwhile collective characters.

After all, we have lived here for some several thousands of years, religiously cooperating with the principles of avarice, hate and general emotional lack of reason to the point where we are in imminent danger of destroying each other so successfully that no one is left. This could be considered a fault in human nature.

I'd be truly grateful to Mrs. (or Miss) Corby for some indication as to the ways human nature "... constantly has been, is being, and will be changed time after time." I don't say it can't change; I believe it will, probably, sooner or later. But I can't see where we've become more intelligent, less hateful, or less susceptible to the beckoning intoxication of mob action since the Hebrews were driven from Egypt or the crucifixion of Christ—or before or after.

Sincerely yours,

ARTHUR STONE

READY... AIM...

418 North Village Ave.,
Rockville Center, N. Y.

Dear Editor (If you really like to use that title after September's issue):

All right you asked for it. How can a magazine go in a year-long slump? Why must you live on your past glory of Bradbury? How you ever managed to publish this magazine is still a mystery.

Theodore Sturgeon, a person of whom I have the deepest respect, must be pretty desperate for money when he writes *THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X*. After reading *WITHOUT SORCERY* and *THE DREAMING JEWELS*, I say: ARE YOU KIDDING, TED?

A STARTLING NOVELET, is what you called *LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS*. After reading it, I can imagine why you were so startled. Startled was only half of what I felt after reading it. I was horrified! Is this the magazine that published, *MARS IS HEAVEN*, *PILLAR OF FIRE*, *ASLEEP IN ARMAGEDDON*, etc., etc.? My God, what a shambles.

I think your opinion of the readers must be that of a bunch of grade school idiots, just passed the *Superman* and *Bugs Bunny* stage.

I can imagine if this gets published, the angry rebuttal I will get. "Well, whad'ya want? A magazine for intellectual giants? A mag you have to feed to a calculating machine to understand?" Or (weas-

ing a look of deep hurt and resentment) "I can't stand Bradbury!" This, by the way, is the only rebuttal he can make. OR "Whad'ya want, all this deep stuff?"

But listen, I'm not writing to the fans, though I would appreciate their views, I am writing to you, the editor. I am writing a plea. After all, I still think of you as an intelligent person, of whom too much strain has been rested. I think you must of hit the floor, after reading *Galaxy*. It seems as if you are rushing things, and take any material; good or bad. I plead to you now, as a fan; though a damned disappointed one, to raise your standard!

I'm awful sick of people called: GARTH, GONGO, THYA, GLUB GLUTZ, ETC., ETC. Why are the alien people always monickered with such titles? It looks like most of your writers are being beaten over the head with old EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS's books.

ARTISTS: I think most of your artists are being haunted by old *Esquire* calendar girls! And are you too cheap to afford real artists? And why the comic book artists?

BRADBURY. . . WE NEED YOU, OR SOMEONE AWFULLY CLOSE TO YOU!

Yours in hope,

LIONEL MELTZER

P.S. The execution will proceed at sunrise . . .

BUSINESS & PLEASURE

Box 163
Cairnbrook, Pa.

Dear Chromium Cranium:

Sounds a lot better than Tin Head, don't you think?

Well, as some old saying about business before pleasure goes, I'll get down to business first. But in stf, even business can be a pleasure.

First of all, the story ratings: A tie for first place between THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X and LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS. For once you have lead stories that belong in a science-fiction magazine. Most of them belong in an adventure mag.

In second I'd place THE INHABITED MEN. An old idea, but a nice story anyway. Then comes LAST NIGHT OUT, running a close third. SANCTUARY, OH ULLA! drops into fourth with THE STAR FOOL, TYDOR'S GIFT, THE WATCHERS, and HOSPITALITY following in that order. A sad last place befalls VENGEANCE ON MARS which doesn't contain much stf. More like a cops-and-robbers epic. As for the illustrations, all of Vestal's work was good. In fact, very good. But the other illos and the cover were strictly *odeur de putoir*. Only half of Anderson's cover was worth using. That half was the back of the painting.

And now on to La Viz! The best letter (if you could call any single one *good*) was by Don J. Lanoue. Second, to John Davis, and third, to Lin Carter.

Oho! So ole Doug Mitchell wants to quarrel, huh? Just like him! Phooey! Who wants to fight ia La Viz? We're here to have fun, no?

Also, anyone who doesn't like Bradbury is cuckoo!

Before I sign off, I have something else to say.

It might interest you to know that the first stf zine I ever bought was *Planet Stories*, way back in '48. The Fall ish contained CITADEL OF THE GREEN DEATH which was so good that it drew me right into the stf field. Even to the point of writing it. However, until the summer of last year, I could find only three stf mags—two of them were *Planet*. In 1950 I managed to get them all, but *Planet* is still a must.

I wonder how many other fen share the following experience with me. It's probably a common one. Back in '48, and even in '50, I was so enthusiastic about stf that every story I read was tops. Probably the fascination of the hitherto unimaginable. But now my imagination has rushed forward in leaps and bounds, and has enabled me to write in a creative sense, not just to relate something already learned. At the same time I learned to choose between stories that were really appealing and those that were just run-of-the-mill stf.

With that thought, I now leave you.

Ultrascientifically yours,

HAROLD HOSTETLER

NO LIKEE?

1618 Coney Island Ave.,
Brooklyn 30, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Robot:

Where the hell did you get that Chinese accent? It does no credit to the mag, so please stop this inanity.

First, this letter is full of comments on the Sept. Ish of the mag known as PLANET STORIES, and what a name it is. The cover is fine, but if there ever was a jewel that could be set like that, let me know. My ex-husband was in the jewelry line, and he should know that there could not be a jewel set like that that would stay in the setting.

THE INCUBI OF PARALLEL X wasn't too good. Shame on you.

LORD OF A THOUSAND SUNS wasn't much better.

SANCTUARY, OH ULLA! wasn't bad, but why no more characterization?

THE INHABITED MEN wasn't too good.

Neither was THE STAR FOOL.

LAST NIGHT OUT, was probably the only one in the entire mag that I liked, and the only one that was worth my quarter.

TYDOR'S GIFT was a cute one, but a little too obvious.

THE WATCHERS was hackneyed.

VENGEANCE ON MARS was a real stinker.

HOSPITALITY was cute, and for a change, logical.

The Vizigraph was inane, as usual, asinine, as usual, and puerile, as usual. Once upon a time, I too wrote letters like the majority of those, but there must be a limit.

Thanks for your patience.

BUCKEY SLAVIN

BE STRONG!

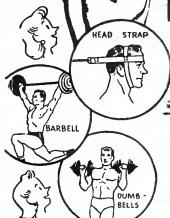


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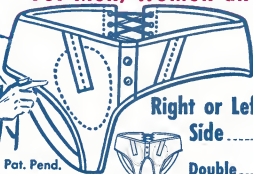
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